

City of Coral Gables
Special City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item B-1
May 6, 2025
City Hall Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro (Absent)

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez

Commissioner Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Alberto Parjus

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Deputy City Attorney, Stephanie Throckmorton

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Jackson Rip Holmes

Claudia Miro

Agenda Item B-1 [9:20 a.m.]

An Ordinance of the City Commission amending Section 1- “ Creation, Composition, Election, Terms, Vacancies, Qualifications” and Section 1.1 “Run-Off Election” of Article 1 “City Commission and Mayor” of the City Charter to change the date of the General Election from April 13, 2027 to November 03, 2026 and to change the date of all subsequent elections; providing for a four (4) month reduction of existing terms of office; moving the Run-Off Election to four (4) weeks after the General Election and moving the Swearing-In date to five (5) weeks after the General Election; amending Section 3 “Election to Office; Commission As Judge of Qualifications, Requirements, Ballots, Canvassing, and Qualifying Periods” amending the qualifying period; adopting such Charter Amendments pursuant to Section 100.3605, 101.75, and 166.021(4), Florida Statutes; providing for a repealer provision, severability clause, codification, and providing for an effective date. (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

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Mayor Lago: Moving on to the first item at hand. Madam City Attorney, please read the title.

City Attorney Suarez: Thank you, Mayor. Item B-1 is an Ordinance of the City Commission amending Section 1- “ Creation, Composition, Election, Terms, Vacancies, Qualifications” and Section 1.1 “Run-Off Election” of Article 1 “City Commission and Mayor” of the City Charter to change the date of the General Election from April 13, 2027 to November 03, 2026 and to change the date of all subsequent elections; providing for a four (4) month reduction of existing terms of office; moving the Run-Off Election to four (4) weeks after the General Election and moving the Swearing-In date to five (5) weeks after the General Election; amending Section 3 “Election to Office; Commission As Judge of Qualifications, Requirements, Ballots, Canvassing, and Qualifying Periods” amending the qualifying period; adopting such Charter Amendments pursuant to Section 100.3605, 101.75, and 166.021(4), Florida Statutes; providing for a repealer provision, severability clause, codification, and providing for an effective date. The Deputy City Attorney can present the item.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Madam City Attorney.

Deputy City Attorney Throckmorton: Thank you, Mr. Mayor, Vice Mayor, members of the Commission, Stephanie Throckmorton, Deputy City Attorney. As the City Attorney mentioned in that very long title, this is an item that changes the date of our election and would change the April 13, 2027, Election to November 3, 2026. As we’ve discussed previously, our Charter calls for elections in April, however, state law allows that that date can be changed via ordinance and that’s what this ordinance is before you today. It would reduce the existing terms of three of the five current members and the additional two and two additional years by four months, as the swearing in would then occur in December of 2026 rather than April of 2027. It adjusts the Run-Off date from two weeks to four weeks. This is to comply with what we heard from Miami-Dade County Elections that given the Thanksgiving Holiday and the larger November Election, it would need to be a larger Run-Off period, and it also amends the qualification day to earlier in the summer to qualify in time for the ballot for November. I would note that this is an item that we’ve discussed previously. I’m happy to go into the details of the changes to the Charter, but you can see them all in the ordinance, and as I mentioned before, this is one area of the law where the state has allowed us to amend our Charter via ordinance. So, happy to answer any questions.

Mayor Lago: Before we move on to the Commission. Mr. Clerk, do we have any public comment.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor. First speaker is Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Remember, please state your name and address for the record. As a reminder, there’s a three-minute time limit. Once the time beeps, I will ask you to finish your sentence and be seated.

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If you spoke during the public comment period on this agenda item, I will remind you that you will not be given an opportunity to speak again. Please address all comments to the Commission as-a-whole, not an individual.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. Let it be known that every time I speak, I give my name and address. I never hide. This is very interesting, because there was a petition circulated in this city asking the residents to change to sign that they wanted to change the elections. This petition was started January 1, 2024. As of April 24, 2025, a year and three months, they collected 4,983 signatures, only 1461 were valid, and 3,522 were not. How do I know? – because the Elections Department produces the status report and the status report dated April 24, 2025, lists those numbers. So here we are trying to do what the residents, what the taxpayers did not choose to do. Once again, it's what I, the emperor wants, not necessarily what the people want, and before, before somebody brings up the Recall Petition, we, I, was the head of the Recall Petition, I was the figurehead and we had one month, one month, not a year and three months, one month. We collected 1,719 petitions, out of which 1,533 were valid, so 1,500 residents in this city wanted to recall the Mayor and only 186 were not valid. So, compare that to the previous numbers. If you don't believe them, I can forward you the email where the status report is, and I'm sure that I did not use my three minutes but have a wonderful day.

Mayor Lago: Again, if I may, I'd like to remind you, please stick to items on the agenda. Failed recall efforts are not on the agenda. Let's address the issues on the agenda today. We will follow our rules and procedures. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mr. Holmes: Okay. First of all, I think we should have not had this meeting rushed. This is a very important item and people have not even really gotten full notice, nor the ability to study the items myself included. As to the issue of when is the election – people can deny this all they want, but the real motive that was behind switching this from April to November is to let money, developer money control the outcome. The developers in a November election know that people are not going to be paying that close of attention, they are going to be paying attention to who they vote for President, for Senator, for Governor, and the votes in the city races will be an afterthought heavily influenced by how much they've seen the name recognition generated by developers, as opposed to local candidates knocking on doors. So, that's what this whole thing is about. Developers buying City Hall. I haven't had a chance to fully study the legal ramifications. I think Maria Cruz comments were right. If this is so legal to do it this way, instead of by petition, instead of requiring a vote of the voters, then how come you saw the vote – you circulated a petition to begin with. The petition is relevant because it shows that there's a competing interpretation of the law and given the consequence of this, I will support litigation if it's appropriate, but I haven't had time to thoroughly study it, to stop this effort, this item. Thank you.

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City Clerk Urquia: Claudia Miro.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Ms. Miro: Good morning again. Claudia Miro, residing at 343 Majorca Avenue, Coral Gables. I wasn't planning on speaking on this issue, but I think that it's important because as someone who worked in Tallahassee for so many years, you know that it takes years to get a Bill passed. Here we enjoy the instant gratification of getting things passed right away, but in Tallahassee it takes one year after another and I don't think that this is an issue that we should continue to discuss and fight over at the city level, because it's being addressed at the state level. There's a Bill in Tallahassee and its Senate Bill 1416. It did not make it, as you know Session has ended, but it will be back again next year, and the way that it works is that it gets further along in the process, one committee to the next until it finally passes. It gets further along, every year it takes on amendments, and then finally it passes. So, I see us all. There are arguments, good arguments to be made on both sides of this issue to have them in April, to have them in November, but right now there is a movement in Tallahassee and as I believe, the staff person who talked about this, this is an area where the state can come and tell us how they want things done. So that's exactly what they're doing right now. There is a movement across the entire State of Florida that expands much further than our City of Coral Gables to move all municipal elections to November. So, I just kind of wanted to say that because I think there's a lot of people who really don't know that this is going on and us sitting and chatting about it when it's going to happen anyway and it's in the process of happening right now. So, I just wanted to kind of bring that to the public forefront. And thank you very much for entertaining my comments.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: That's it, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Alright. I'll entertain a motion.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I'll move this and thank you Mayor, I'd like to make some comments when the time is appropriate, when we have a second, we can proceed to comments.

Mayor Lago: Is there a second.

Commissioner Lara: Second.

Mayor Lago: Now is the time for discussion amongst the Commission.

Deputy City Attorney Throckmorton: Mr. Chair, I just wanted to clarify one item I neglected to mention earlier that this does have a whereas clause that should this ordinance be adopted by the City Commission, the city also wishes to send a question to the electors of the city for affirmation

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of this change during a special election to be held at a later date as determined by the City Commission. And I apologize for not mentioning that earlier.

Mayor Lago: We can talk about that during the discussion. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I want to thank you Mayor for bringing this item back. This is something I brought approximately two years ago, and during this past election it was one of my platform issues to move the elections to November to increase voter turnout, increase voter participation so that we make it easier for people to vote, and don't do what has been done in some municipalities and that is try to reduce voter turnout in order to make sure that incumbents get reelected. This is something that our State Representative felt very strongly about. I think the voters have spoken by choosing individuals that they have reelected and elected in Commissioner Lara into the seat that this is a consistent issue amongst all three of us. So, I also brought this issue before the League of Cities to try to have consensus among all cities in the State of Florida. Not all cities are the same. This is a large city where we have a lot of people involved. We are not a snowbird city anymore and some of those tiny towns in the middle of the State of Florida do have snowbird-type cities where it's better to have the elections during other times of the year other than in November. So, we are not burdened by that aspect of it, and if you look historically at the political divide on when elections are and its typical incumbents want to have these off-season elections, again to ensure that they get reelected by the same pool of people who elected him in the first place. I think the voters have spoken loudly in this election and support this idea or this measure to move the elections to November.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Madam Vice Mayor. Commissioner Lara.

Commissioner Lara: Thank you. This is my first time speaking at the Commission meeting, so thank you for giving me the privilege to speak at this point. Echoing the Vice Mayor's comments. As everybody knows, who participated in this last election, this was a platform point for me. It was one of the tenants of why I ran and for the thousands of homes that I knocked on over the last year and-a-half, this was not only a point that I made perfectly clear, but the residents also made perfectly clear back to me that they wanted to have a greater voice, greater representation. I think it's an argument that can be made on two sides, but I think that the right side of the argument is the one that we have before us today. So, at the risk of being redundant, Vice Mayor, I want to repeat as we all know, the electorate will typically on a good year during an April odd-year election appear with anywhere between 17 to 20 percent of the registered voters actually voting. I do not believe, and I don't subscribe to the view that Coral Gables does not vote, because in a November even year, you are going to look at numbers that exceed 80 percent of the electorate turning out to vote. So rather than seek a continued position which in some view could be described as being voter suppression, which is in my view an April odd-year election, we should try and be inclusive and make it easier for people to vote rather than make it more difficult for them to vote. I know

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that this most recent election underscores what I'm saying, because not only do we have a large turnout for the General Election, my Run-Off Election was the largest in the history of Coral Gables, and I think that when they come out in those numbers it matches up exactly with what I heard when I was knocking on the doors and that's the residents wanted a change and that is one of the promises and the commitments that I made and that will be one of the promises and commitments today that I will deliver. So, not only are we giving what the people deserve and ask for, which is a greater voice at the ballot box, but we'll also be saving some money by moving this to November and not an insignificant amount. I'm not saying that's the driving voice, or the driving point, but it is certainly an additional benefit for why I'm supportive of this initiative, this item agenda put forth by the Mayor. So, with that Mayor, I'll turn it back to you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Commissioner. Commissioner Fernandez.

Commissioner Fernandez: I agree. I do think that we saw a desire of residents to chime in on the November election, but I think Ms. Miro pointed out perfectly, just because we have an ability to do so in state law could change the election unilaterally, I think it is something that should be left up to voters to decide. Ms. Cruz point, the referendum, is something that I was looking into over the last few days. In a year and-a-half there wasn't even the ability to collect enough signatures to get this item on the ballot. So, the question is whether residents really want to make the change. Ms. Miro also brought up another very good point, which is the State of Florida is currently considering legislation. State legislation would actually save the city more money than the change that is being proposed today. That change would move the General Election to August with a Run-Off in November, which would allow for the city to only spend \$20,000 or \$25,000, is that the new number, Mr. Clerk, that you sent in the memo.

City Clerk Urquia: That sounds about right.

Commissioner Fernandez: On each of the two elections. But I think this is a decision that should be left up to the residents of the City of Coral Gables. I don't think that seeing election results would tell us exactly where they felt in this one issue. I think they felt these were the candidates that they wanted up here. These are the elected officials that they want representing them, but my opinion and my support is to place this item on the ballot for residents to make the decision.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. I'm going to be very brief. I go with sentiments of the Vice Mayor and Commissioner Lara, they are well taken, they are well placed. I want to be clear. There was a comment that was made, quality versus quantity. Every vote is quality. We should always remember that. To the point of the Vice Mayor and also Commissioner Lara, if you look at the numbers from 2025, the Run-Off numbers were the largest Run-Off numbers in the history of the City of Coral Gables. They were larger than Commissioner Fernandez' General Election in 2023. That's a statement in itself. In that election you had 20.9 percent of people come out to vote. In the

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Run-Off you had 23.14, significant. This was almost as large as my first General Election in 2021 when we had almost 10,500 people vote. In this election, we had 10,126. I walked thousands of homes in this community, as I've done in the past. The statement was very clear, they want a November election. I polled this through a professional pollster. Over 72 percent of individuals that were polled viewed this as a no-brainer. Saving the city money and ensuring transparency. So today we move forward, and the great part about this, as the sponsor of this item, because I'm not benefiting myself. I'm shaving four months from my term to ensure that we offer transparency. You will not hear that from the blogs, you will not hear that from the Herald, but that is what we were hopefully doing today, and it's the right thing to do. You should never ever be afraid to go before more voters and have them be the judge in regard to whether you have done a good job for the city. Like Commissioner Fernandez just stated, the residents have spoken, it's clear. The mandate is larger than ever. Let's move forward and deliver what the residents want. We have a motion and a second. Mr. Clerk, I call a question.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: For the reasons stated, no.

Commissioner Lara: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes

(Vote: 3-1)

Mayor Lago: I'll also like to put on the record, as our City Attorney mentioned, this will go to the voters also, to ensure that this is again, the correct thing to do on behalf of the representation of the residents of the City Beautiful. Thank you very much.