

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-10
July 11, 2023
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Melissa Castro

Commissioner Ariel Fernandez

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Historical Resources Officer, Anna Pernas

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-10 [3:46 p.m.]

Update regarding historic district designation study in North Ponce residential infill district.
(Sponsored by Vice Mayor Anderson)

Mayor Lago: F-10.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Update regarding historic district designation study for the North Ponce residential infill district.

Mayor Lago: How are you.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Welcome.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: Good afternoon.

Mayor Lago: Welcome to your first meeting.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: Yes, first meeting, first month. So, I appreciate you all being easy on me today.

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Vice Mayor Anderson: Its just an update.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: Yes. I do have a couple of slides prepared. I did do some background homework on this item. I did want to start with just a little bit of background of the actual North Ponce area, to give you an idea of the importance and what historic significance it does have. And the next slide please. So, the Douglas area was actually platted in October 1926, and this area was meant to be a distinctive section of Coral Gables due to its apartment houses, due to its proximity to the business district and other landmarks. The Coral Gables Douglas Entrance was actually designed and built in that area as well. The apartment – the major features advertised in the Coral Gables section was this Douglas Entrance and subsequently became part of the advertisements of the apartments for rent in that area. The development of the apartments continued throughout the 130s and early 1940s and has continued to be the primary use of that area throughout the present day. Next slide. These are the boundaries of the North Ponce area. The boundaries of the North Ponce is about 40 city blocks with nearly 400 properties. The buildings between 1920s and 1940s account for about 100 or those properties.

Commissioner Menendez: I have a quick question, sorry to interrupt. Can you go back to the slide before. I understand what you meant, but growth slowed in this portion of Coral Gables late 1920s. What kind of growth?

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: The growth of the development of that. That was also during the time of the hurricane and also...

Commissioner Menendez: The Great Depression.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: And The Great Depression and it also was, since the area wasn't platted until 1926, it wasn't advertised until that time.

Commissioner Menendez: So, what was the growth that was started or didn't complete. What kind of growth was it?

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: Between 1920 and 25, what we have in existing stock, there's only about five properties left. Most of the property's influx starts at 1925 through 1926, is where you see the highest numbers for the 1920s, and then that moves into the 1930s. You have the Great Depression where there are really only about 13 properties that were constructed during the 1930s, and then you go back up into the 1940s.

Commissioner Menendez: I think you made reference that was one of the main entrances into the Gables from, I guess 8th Street and Flagler.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: Right.

Commissioner Menendez: One of the major promenades.
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Historical Resources Officer Pernas: I think that because Ponce de Leon was being developed as that thoroughfare and that connection into the business district.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes, and the connection between us and downtown Miami, which I think was Flagler and 8th Street, that was a major connecting, that's why I figured they had that, we still have that beautiful entrance. I was just curious in terms of growth and then the growth stopped. Thank you.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: No problem. So, the boundaries of the area, like I said, we have the district boundaries that still continues to have a primary use of multi-family and apartment complexes. And then for today's update, to provide you. I did a little timeline about the application that was submitted to the Historic Preservation staff. There was an application in 2018 that was received. This listed about 100 properties for designation for the Garden City Apartment Buildings and was submitted on behalf of the Villagers Inc. within the year between April 23, 2018, and November 1, 2019. Staff continued to study the list and surveyed the area of the North Ponce. The list grew between staff's recommendation and the applicant's recommendation to about 200 properties that they went through and photographed; and in November 1, 2019, a determination letter was made by Donna Spain, the Director at the time that said that, as presented the application did not meet the criteria and that it did not have what we look at for the designation of a district for the theme or style or any sort of consistency. The applicant was given the opportunity to move their application to the board at that time, but there was no further action taken. On April 25, 2022, there was a discussion item that had been deferred here before you. Since that time, no staff action has been taken. There was discussion on how to kind of manage a district and a designation of this size, but the staff resources are really just not there to handle something like this at this time without creating a significant impact on our day-to-day activity. And the last slide here. This is the section of the code that I just wanted to highlight here why the determination was made, but so for multiple property nominations eligibility be based on the establishment of historic contexts or themes which describe the historic relationship of the properties. So, the application at the time kind of had a range of properties without really focusing on one specific era, time period, type or style. And then, sorry, just one more. This is where we talk about the typology or thematic designation which may be more appropriate to move forward within the designation of this kind for the North Ponce area, but we focus on a time period and a typology that would really focus on creating a thematic designation for the area.

Mayor Lago: Madam Director when you mentioned before in the previous slide about timeline and lack of staffing to accomplish this goal. What are we looking at in regard to cost if we use an outside consultant?

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: An outside consultant for an area of this size would probably be around \$50,000.

Mayor Lago: How many properties do you think would be potentially designated or what would be your best guess for a positive outcome of hiring an outside consultant. We're trying to watch every penny now and be very thoughtful. What are the positives of moving forward in this direction?

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: So, between the 1920s and 1940s there are over 131 structures dated in that time period. Doesn't mean that every single one is in good condition. It doesn't mean that every single one hasn't been altered. So, what the survey would do would go through the properties and make a conditions assessment and study each property for its historic significance within that theme that is picked and that's part of also the contract. After within the 1050s, 108 structures were constructed, so that's also something to be considered and studied because it does meet the age criteria for the park service that we need to follow. I think what you see within the boundaries, creating something like this takes a lot of time and part of it is also being sensitive to the property owners of that area that are not used to the designation or having that designation on their property. So, the amount of public meetings, surveys, charettes, and things also is part of that process that's going to be really important to handle and that outside consultant can help organize that.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Anderson: This has been one of those issues that's recurred, and requests have been made from our city for a number of years and unfortunately, we haven't had the resources or time in our department to get it done. Your predecessor was hoping to have it done with a bow on it by the first quarter of this year, and it just wasn't feasible, and now that you've stepped in the department you understand why it wasn't feasible. Rather than, I hate to use the cliché, kick the can down the road, I think it's better to look at these items now before we lose some potential treasures. We have lost some and we will lose more if we don't wrap our heads around it at this time. City Manager, we've discussed what it would take to have an outside consultant take care of this, so we don't burden our staff and slow down our staff on the many jobs that they have to do, and would you agree that it can be done for a fee of \$50,000?

City Manager Iglesias: Yes. In my discussions with the director about \$50,000 to do the entire area, the entire district, and that's something that we can certainly look at. I don't believe staff has the time to look at that many buildings, especially 20s, 30s and 40s or look at the entire area, I think the prior director looked at 200 homes, excuse me, buildings and decided that its not really a district. We're looking now at the individual structures is what we're looking at now, because it doesn't really qualify and that was determined before as a district. So that would be approximately \$50,000, correct, to look at the entire district.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: That would start the survey process.

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City Manager Iglesias: The survey process.

Mayor Lago: Do we have the monies in this year's budget, or do we have to wait for next year?

City Manager Iglesias: We would have to look at the, its not in the current budget, we would have to look at the budget prior to September and see if we can find the funds, Mayor, to get this done.

Mayor Lago: So, if it's the will of the Commission, can you potentially look in this year's budget and see if there's monies available to fund this study and see if we can include it in this year's budget, if not, we'll have to make it a priority for next year.

City Manager Iglesias: We'll try to include it in this year's budget, in the September budget.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Okay.

Historical Resources Officer Pernas: Thank you.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Great work.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Any other comments.

Commissioner Fernandez: I agree with you. I think its important to take care of this now rather than continuing to kick the can down the road. I know the Commission has had the will to do it in the past, just hasn't been able to do it. I think if we can take the action now, we'll set ourselves on the right footing going forward.

Commissioner Castro: I got an enormous amount of calls and e-mails supporting this. This is something that the residents really are looking for it making it happen.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I'll put it on the record too. I've received a lot of e-mails as well.

Commissioner Menendez: I have plenty of e-mails. Amazing how everybody has very similar writing styles in those e-mails, but very passionate, very on point, and when you have that kind of passion in the community you know it's a priority. I think we're going in the right direction.

Mayor Lago: Alright. Moving onto item F-11.