

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item 2-1
September 28, 2021
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jorge Fors

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Gordon Sokoloff

Agenda Item 2-1 [10:43 a.m.]

A Resolution of the Coral Gables Parking Advisory Board requesting that city staff be directed to evaluate parking conditions around the Coral Gables Courthouse and review options for developing additional public parking including the potential for an agreement between Miami-Dade County and the City of Coral Gables to provide additional public parking at the Courthouse.

Mayor Lago: So, we're moving forward to Agenda Item 2-1, 10:30. Good morning, Dr. Sokoloff. How are you, sir?

Gordon Sokoloff: Fine, thank you. Good morning, everybody, one and all. You all have the resolution in front of you. This is from the -- this is a resolution of the Parking Advisory Board of which I am the vice chair. And this is a -- I'm going to say from the outset that I come to you not only as the Vice Chair of the Parking Advisory Board, but also as a founding member of the Ponce Neighbors Association. So, when you look at this resolution, it is a suggestion that the City of Coral Gables investigate either purchasing or partnering with Miami-Dade County for the courthouse along Ponce de Leon to at least inquire about the possibility of acquiring that property from them or partnering with them, so that that property can be possibly rebuilt. And when I say rebuilt, to put back the courthouse either on the bottom floor or the top floor, but as the neighbors of the Ponce Neighbors Association would like something that as a four-story limit is a parking garage. We need parking in that area with all the increased density. I hate to use that word again, but it's right there with the posit with Ponce Park Tower coming online at some point, and of course, the Plaza. Something that's a four-story limit, something that has a beautiful design, maybe include a park, green space, because it's a big lot, and also something that's sustainable, something that may incorporate the qualities of the upcoming Mobility Hub. I mean, something that's beautiful and nice. So, our board would like to suggest that we investigate this with Miami-Dade County. I had spoken with Alex Muñoz, the Director of Miami-Dade County Internal Services. He said that so far, there are no known offers on the property, but he stated that if the City of Coral Gables were so inclined, they could engage with the County to discuss the possibility of purchasing the property and building parking upon it pursuant to our discussion on the Parking Advisory Board. I spoke with him on August 6. I'd also spoken to Anthony Escarrá, Deputy Chief of Staff for Commissioner Regalado on August 10th. He was well versed with our situation, and he's concerned about it. He had been speaking with Mayor Lago, who has in turn also been in touch with the Ponce neighbors. He said Miami Metro Dade has no immediate inclinations to sell the property or do anything with it at all, but again, as my dual position, I would think, or I would hope that the City of Coral Gables would at least ask for the right of first refusal should Miami-Dade County ever decide they want to sell that property. Basically, I'm going to make no bones about it, to take it off the table of developers who, if they get a hold of it, another 16-story building. And the community there is already fighting, as you well know with Allen Morris trying to contain

the height of that building, and they already have been under assault, I would say, from what's going on with the Plaza, which is just a huge development next to their homes. So, we're hoping that you would consider this resolution, which is basically a request that we pursue checking this out and maybe partnering or buying this property from Miami-Dade County. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Doctor. Like you said, I've worked with the residents in regard to this, and I met with Commissioner Regalado and her team to discuss it along with our staff. I think this is a wonderful opportunity to start engaging with the County. Just like you said, a 190-foot building is allowed as per the Code right now, and I think it's incumbent on us to ensure that the firewall continues to be university, which I think is critically important to the residential neighbors adjacent to this. So, that's my biggest concern, seeing a massive building. But I also understand, after speaking with our City Attorney, how important that courthouse is to Miami-Dade County. I don't want to say it's their most important, but I think it probably -- I think we can say it's probably their most important facility. So, I think what we could potentially do is come to some agreement where we could potentially either buy the property, joint venture, build a parking garage. Do something which is tastefully done in accordance with the City of Coral Gables standards and continues to offer that amenity, which by the way, is a great amenity. If you have to pay a parking ticket or you had to -- you know, you have a court issue you got to address, it's in our own backyard, and I think a lot of people really enjoy that. So, I think that right now is -- we're being proactive instead of being reactive. Case in point, what happened in Douglas Station where they put a 37-story building where it was supposed to be 40, and they did us the favor of reducing it by three stories and the thousands of units that are forthcoming there that have not hit, that have not come online yet, which are going to be a congestion nightmare. So, I think this is an opportunity for the Manager and his team to just have conversations and show our interest and potentially engage in conversations, and like you said, either start working on something or have first right of refusal if that's even a possibility. And I would -- I don't know -- in regards to this, this is a resolution just accepting it?

Vice Mayor Mena: It's just accepting it, right?

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Anderson: I would accept it. I mean, there is a significant parking problem there, if anybody's ever gone...

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

Commissioner Anderson: There for a traffic ticket or so forth for one of their family members; I have. It's tough to find a spot.

Mayor Lago: Yep.

Commissioner Menendez: I want to add that I am in total agreement, total support for this. And I think the Mayor made a great point. We need to get ahead of things. And I think it's interesting, the concern or the issue of what could actually be built on that site was sort of not on anybody's radar. Until recently when I caught wind of it, I realized the impact would be devastating to the community. But I also remember when the I -- it used to be a grocery store -- I forgot, A&P, or Piggly Wiggly, one of those. Some of you might remember, I don't. And then the battle for the courthouse, you know, there was pro and against. And at the end of the day, I agree, it really serves the community very well.

Mr. Sokoloff: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: But we should do everything in our power with the support of community to make sure that we get -- we do something that's long lasting beneficial to the community, and we can contain it. So, I have -- you have my complete support on this.

Mr. Sokoloff: Thank you. Yeah, I talked to...

City Attorney Ramos: So, this is a resolution of a board asking the Commission to take action. If the Commission wants to take action, you should move that action so that we can put it in a resolution of the City Commission.

Vice Mayor Mena: And the...

Commissioner Menendez: I'd like to...

Vice Mayor Mena: The only -- the question -- listen, if we want to engage and have a conversation, sure; why not? I mean, that's fine. I don't know what leverage we have, you know, from the perspective of -- like they're not just going to give us a right of first refusal, right?

Mayor Lago: No, I don't think we have much leverage, but we could -- but it's a -- just have a conversation.

Vice Mayor Mena: So, my point is, like we'd have to have some sort of idea of how -- like what are we bringing to the table? Because we're asking them to bring something to the table if it's right of first refusal or whatever it is. You know, they're not just -- like I said, they're not just going to give us that so...

Mayor Lago: You know what I think we bring to the table if I may.

Vice Mayor Mena: Don't we have to have a plan in terms of...

Mayor Lago: I think we'll...

Vice Mayor Mena: What's the discussion really going to be about. We know what our objective is. I understand that.

Mr. Sokoloff: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: That makes sense.

Mr. Sokoloff: Yeah.

Vice Mayor Mena: But I would also note the amount of development that is currently entitled there just drives up the price of the lot as well. You know, it's a very expensive piece of property if anybody wanted to buy it.

Mr. Sokoloff: Yes.

Mayor Lago: You know what I...

Vice Mayor Mena: So, there's challenges that we have to figure out I think a more comprehensive plan of what can we bring to the table to try to achieve the desired result because otherwise we're kind of just asking and...

Mayor Lago: I think what we bring to the table is an opportunity to do a joint venture, where we tie up the property where maybe the City takes a proactive role where we build a new...

Commissioner Anderson: Right.

Mayor Lago: Courthouse out of the first floor, or the top floor, kind of like what they did at the Miami Parking Authority, where we build a structure for them, where we get some great parking for the community, where, you know, it's safe, kind of like we're doing with the Public Safety Building, where a certain area of the parking is accessible to the police officers and to staff, while certain may not be available. Where we could do something to that effect. It's just have a

conversation, see what their needs are. They could potential tell us, "Listen, we have no interest in selling this. We're not going anywhere. We're not entertaining any offers." We have -- we've accept -- "We've gotten 30 offers and we turned them down." But the idea of potentially building them a facility, I know that, again, money is scarce.

Mr. Sokoloff: Right.

Mayor Lago: We have resources. We have resources, even though things are a little tough this year, but we could potentially plan for the near future and do something with our bonding rate that could allow us a lot of flexibility and we could do some sort of facility, like some sort of -- we could kind of engage in an opportunity that could benefit the business -- the small businesses in that area, along with protecting that neighborhood.

Mr. Sokoloff: So, basically, we're totally behind it, and I come with that authority as a Ponce Neighbors member. They're totally behind this endeavor. And you don't get if you don't ask.

Commissioner Menendez: Right.

Mr. Sokoloff: So, I figured why not ask.

Commissioner Menendez: So, with this resolution, basically it's just the green light approach...

Unidentified Speaker: There's two options.

City Attorney Ramos: Directing the City Manager to engage in conversation.

Commissioner Menendez: And I'd be more than happy to make that motion.

Commissioner Anderson: And I'll second it. And I'll note too for the City Manager that the County at times is short on courtroom space, so this could be a win-win situation for both the County as well as us.

Commissioner Fors: I -- historically, is there precedent for shutting down courthouses? I mean, how often do courthouses get shut down?

Vice Mayor Mena: Not often.

Commissioner Fors: Not often, and it's an access to justice issue. It's a point of...

Unidentified Speaker: Good point.

Commissioner Fors: Clearing their dockets. That's why I've never been too worried about them shutting it down, but who knows? They could venture in a joint venture with somebody else. Go up 190 feet, keep the courthouse on the bottom, right? So, just because...

Commissioner Menendez: If we can relocate our library while we're doing changes, maybe we can relocate this item until it's done.

Mayor Lago: You never know.

Commissioner Anderson: Right.

Mayor Lago: You have a motion and a second, Mr. Clerk?

Commissioner Anderson: Yes.

Commissioner Fors: Yes.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Dr. Sokoloff.

Mr. Sokoloff: Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thanks.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Please tell your board members we appreciate their commitment to the City.