

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-4
August 27, 2024
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, Amos Rojas, Jr.

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Lynne Bluestein

Kayla Riera Gomez

Luciana Gonzalez

Agenda Item F-4 [12:15 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission ending the annexation process for Little Gables
(Sponsored by Commissioner Fernandez)

Mayor Lago: Moving onto item F-4.

City Attorney Suarez: F-4 is a Resolution of the City Commission ending the annexation process for Little Gables.

Commissioner Fernandez: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. So, last Tuesday we had a straw ballot question regarding the annexation of Little Gables. I think the results of that were pretty decisive. The residents of our city are not interested in continuing to pursue the annexation of Little Gables. So, I asked the City Attorney to work on a resolution today, ending the process of annexation of Little Gables today, so that we don't continue to spend taxpayer dollars on the annexation of Little Gables. I've heard from many residents over the last few days grateful for the Commission's
City Commission Meeting
August 27, 2024

interest in listening to the people and taking their decision this election seriously. I've heard from others who still think that the item should be discussed and still considered. However, in my opinion, I think the will of the voters of Coral Gables who would be footing the bill for annexation of Little Gables was pretty clear and that's why I move to accept this resolution.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Mayor, if I may.

Mayor Lago: Go ahead.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I concur. The voters have spoken. At this time the will and the cost of the project does not warrant moving forward. That may change in however many years forward, but at this time I would concur and move the item.

Commissioner Fernandez: You second, I moved it.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes, I'll second. I'll let you move it.

Commissioner Menendez: I was giving some thought after seeing the results and I know there are arguments on both sides, but in the corporate world when there is a merger, the shareholders on both sides have to vote to approve the merger. When there is a wedding both sides have to say, I do, and the way I look at it right now the Coral Gables residents said, not yet. So, I'm in agreement with Commissioner Fernandez and Vice Mayor Anderson on the direction we need to take.

Commissioner Castro: I was in the position that I didn't think this is the correct timing to do this. It wasn't fiscally smart at this moment to do this, and I always said, let the people vote and they did vote, and this is what they want, and I'd be more than happy not move or second but go ahead and vote.

Mayor Lago: So, I disagree. I think that annexation is a great opportunity for the city. I think that, like I've spoken to many residents who are in favor some were against, and some were in the middle. I think the key is who's in the middle, and when you look at the opportunity here, you have a ballot that received 19 percent of the individuals that came out to vote. And when you look at the breakdown after almost a year of not talking about annexation outside of our conversations here in the Commission Chambers. We had no output, we had no outreach, we didn't put anything via email, we didn't put anything via newsletter, we didn't put anything telling people tomorrow there's an opportunity to understand a little bit more at this workshop in regard to annexation, and to still garner almost 40 percent, to me, is a pretty significant amount. And I'll tell you why I think it's important for annexation to always be an opportunity in the city, especially when you talk about Little Gables. You are talking about SB102, which is an issue that we are going to have to deal with here in Miami-Dade County, and you're going to see that discussed today at 4:30 in regards to a project that again, we have to make very tough decisions here and SB102 handcuffs the city in regards to what we can do, and I foresee Little Gables being used as an SB102 conversation. It's a fact. You're going to see that conversation today on another project that's being brought forth and proffered here in the Commission. 27 – I got 19, I was wrong, 27 percent of the individuals that came out to vote. Thank you for the clarity. I appreciate that. I asked the Clerk,
City Commission Meeting
August 27, 2024

and I had the wrong number. So, thank you for that. I think when you think about the opportunity to come out and support something as beneficial, there is every investment takes time. Nothing is done overnight, and you have to invest to be able to reap the rewards, and I think that when you talk about squaring off our borders, I think that annexation wholeheartedly, I'm one of those individuals that believes it's the right thing to do. And I understand that some people disagree and its okay. We can disagree on the matter, but I still have my belief that I think it's an important opportunity for the city and I'm happy we went through the exercise, at the end of the day, but in the future, I would support annexation.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Thank you, Mayor. I have great concerns about SB102 and hopefully in the future the residents of Coral Gables would understand the potential impact that can happen with SB102 in the trailer park and the surrounding community and the values of the homes in Coral Gables that are in those neighborhoods, the traffic impact, as well. So, it's a big concern, we can study it more and we'll see what can happen in the future, so it benefits both the residents of Coral Gables as well as the residents of Little Gables.

Commissioner Fernandez: I think for the residents who are listening and are watching, SB102 is the state's Live Local Act which removes the power of municipalities of enforcing their zoning code. Developers could decide to purchase a property if they meet certain requirements, they are able to build as tall as the tallest building within a mile of their property, within the jurisdiction so long as 40 percent of the building offers workforce housing. And the parameters of workforce housing aren't as stringent as you think they would be, but the current proposal at the Sears location right off of Miracle Mile is one of those projects that will be seeing just outside of our border but will be impacting the City of Coral Gables going forward.

Commissioner Menendez: That's why for the last couple of years, we've tried to let the residents know that a lot of the focus is on decisions we make here inside Coral Gables City Hall, decisions that are made at the county level, but the biggest threat to our City Beautiful comes from Tallahassee, because when investors get frustrated with their own rules and regulations they now realize they have a shortcut to by-pass and they go to Tallahassee and they get support from the legislators there. They pass the laws in Tallahassee that impact us and then our hands are tied, but not only are our hands are tied as elected officials, the residents' hands are tied as well. Then at that point no matter how much we are upset, yell, write emails, Tallahassee has basically imposed its will on us and our residents.

Mayor Lago: If I may add something else to that. I think it's also important that people understand, it's not only the impact in regard to the magnitude of the development. The key is when I mentioned, and this is why it's, to me, it's incredibly important when you talk about annexation that you apply the fact that if Little Gables was part of our jurisdiction, then again, this is neither here nor there, just putting it on the record so people understand why I'm passionate about the idea of the controlling of Little Gables, and that is, if we're able to have Little Gables as part of Gables, we could be in a discussion like we're going to have this afternoon. We're going to sit down and have a conversation here before the Commission, I'm happy its happening the same day, because you'll get to see a developer who's coming forward proffering a project, and also talking about potentially doing SB102, which is an additional 50 feet in height, and it's not only the 50-feet in

*City Commission Meeting
August 27, 2024*

height that we could lose out on, it's also the fact that we lose impact fees, the city would lose impact fees altogether. So those impact fees are used to service our city and to address issues that we have here. Those impact fees would not be part of this community. So, there's multiple issue that we'll be facing in the future and just like we look at certain things and we make decisions today and we vote one way or another, these are things in the future you'll have to take a look at it and say, was it worth moving in this direction, did we make a wrong decision, did we make a right decision. And again, I've looked back on some of my votes and said, I'm not happy with the way I voted on that. I can give you a case in point. The Vice Mayor's conversation in regard to septic to sewer grants that we were accepting for a portion of our city. We should have taken that, even if it was a huge impact to the community. That's one of the ones that come to mind that I wish I could take that vote back. So, when you talk about SB102 and you talk about Little Gables, it's not only just about the fact that you'll see this afternoon, we need this project approved, if not, we'll just move down SB102, but also the issue of the impact fees. The city would receive no impact fees which we would have the impact of a massive project in our community, but we wouldn't have any of the impact fees associated with that to offset that. Yes ma'am.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, in addition, we also have the property tax revenues that are decreased under SB102. This is a topic that didn't exist four years ago when I ran.

Commissioner Fernandez: Two years ago, it didn't exist.

Vice Mayor Anderson: RTZ didn't exist either. All these things have come into play where the power of this Commission has been widdled away more and more and more. So sometimes we have to strike a balance on what we do and it's not always dealing exactly with the issue that we're concerned with right here, but if we want to maintain the values of our Coral Gables properties, you know surrounding Little Gables, surrounding the Central Business District, we have to try to do what's best for our community and that's why I was in favor of annexation because I felt as-a-whole it was the best thing for our community and we could work out the budget going forward. It's not a down payment year one, you know we can work in just like we do everything else, because the cost of planting trees on one side of the border or the other benefits everybody. If you're not going into a blighted area, so it impacts the values in Coral Gables to have a better community next-door. It also makes it much easier to do traffic calming. We don't have to do the dance with the county on what's essentially 16th Street, much more difficult for us to get traffic calming done in reducing speed limits and so forth on these bordering streets between Coral Gables and Little Gables. So, for that reason and the police safety issues, I thought it was in the best interest of our community.

Commissioner Fernandez: To your point, I think Commissioner Cabrera has been phenomenal in helping us bridge the gap with the county and a lot of the issues that we've been having on that border street. I think traffic calming on that street was very quick and addressed the demand, the needs that the residents on Coral Gables side had, as well as the Little Gables side. So, I think we need to be grateful to having him on the County Commission advocating on behalf of Coral Gables residents.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I know. And he'd done a good job, but the number of votes it takes from the constituents on that street is at a higher level than if it was all Coral Gables.

Commissioner Castro: It is, in my opinion, that whether we annexed or not, yes, Live Local is a concern, but if a developer is the idea that he wants to come in and build Live Local, because there are so many other benefits, he's going to build it whether we annex Little Gables or not. So, I stand very firm with the decision we're going to make today. And congratulations to both parties.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Just study Live Local a little more because where you grab the zoning from in the surrounding areas impacted by which municipality.

Commissioner Castro: I've looked into it enough. Thank you though. It's a one-mile radius of the municipality.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I understand.

Mayor Lago: Do we have a motion?

Commissioner Fernandez: We do.

Vice Mayor Anderson: We do.

City Clerk Urquia: I'm sorry, who made the motion?

Commissioner Fernandez: I did.

Mayor Lago: And we have a second.

Commissioner Fernandez: Vice Mayor Anderson seconded.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, I have members of the public requesting to speak.

Mayor Lago: Perfect.

City Clerk Urquia: First speaker is Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I hate to correct you, Mayor, you made it very clear. I heard you, I read what you wrote. There was outreach. There was outreach. How many texts did we get before, even election day we were getting texts to go out and vote yes. Okay. The Miami Herald published an Op-Ed, the Community Newspaper published an Op-Ed asking people to vote for it. Outreach there was. This was David versus Goliath. The people that wanted it put out a big effort. There was big money being spent. There are people who have invested in that area that wanted their money back and guess what, the little people that live in their small homes, the little people that but there because they did not want to be part of Coral Gables because they like to live the way they live won. And I'm sorry, we need to learn to listen. Our residents said no. End
City Commission Meeting
August 27, 2024

of the story. That's it. Listen to the people and to finish, because I've been coming a researcher now. Once again, September 26, 2023, we were talking about annexation, item F-4, and Mrs. Maria Cruz at this point was Miss, I guess Maria Cruz by itself. I said, good afternoon, I think there has to come a time when we accept that we cannot get everything we want and based on what's going on with our city today, based on the fact that we do not have money to do the things that our residents want. Why is this insistence in annexing anybody. Frankly, they made it very clear they're not interested. They are not interested. Why do we continue spending money, consultant, meetings, posters, printing when we do not have the money for our residents, the ones that pay our taxes. I think this is very ill-advised, talking about being very financially, I guess conservative. We're not. We are throwing money down the drain at a point where we do not have the money to throw out. I think enough is enough. Cut your losses while you're ahead and stop spending money because we do not have the money to spend, according to all of you. We have – we do not have money for what we, the residents want. And we're spending money for what may or may not happen. I think anybody who doesn't who lives in Coral Gables or doesn't live in Coral Gables reads the papers, listen to the radio, is aware of what's going on here. Why would anybody want to come and join now when we do not whether we are coming or going, where we don't know what we're doing, where we still do not have money to pave our streets, where we do not have money to do things that our residents are clamoring for. Enough. I know this is probably a legacy project for someone, but you know what, there are no legacy projects in Coral Gables if the residents do not want it. Stop spending our money. And this was almost a year ago and we are here after we spend money, after we did everything that we shouldn't have done and the answer is, the residents don't want it.

City Clerk Urquia: Lynne Bluestein.

Mayor Lago: Good afternoon.

Ms. Bluestein: Hello. Lynne Bluestein, 4330 S.W. 15th Street and good afternoon. I am here today with some of my wonderful and very patient neighbors and also to speak for hundreds of Little Gables residents who could not attend today and share our message. We would like to acknowledge and thank Commissioner Fernandez and all the Commissioners who made the correct decision to ask your taxpaying Coral Gables citizens if they want to annex Little Gables. They overwhelmingly said no – 62.59 percent of your residents said no. Thank you Coral Gables residents for your intelligent and thoughtful vote to not annex Little Gables. Please support Resolution F-4 ending the annexation process for Little Gables and please continue to listen to the residents that you serve. And thank you all so very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is on Zoom, Kayla Riera Gomez.

Mayor Lago: Good afternoon.

City Clerk Urquia: I'm asking them to unmute.

*City Commission Meeting
August 27, 2024*

Ms. Riera Gomez: Can you hear me now?

Mayor Lago: Yes. Thank you.

Ms. Riera Gomez: Okay. Wonderful. So, my question for the Commission is when this ballot item was put out, it was put out as a non-binding straw ballot. However, what is being done today is treating the vote which was done without the residents being well educated by the Commission in terms of what the results would be for annexation or against. The city's website had very little information. I spoke with many North Gables residents who didn't know what the impact of annexation would be for them personally, and they couldn't find the information. It's already been discussed that many of you are unsure what the final impact of SB102 would be. The Sears Project is new. It seems to me that it would make more sense rather than making a final decision today, to see what is going to happen with the Sears Project, to really give consideration and to allow the residents of Coral Gables to get a full explanation of what adding Little Gables to Coral Gables could mean and in very clear and well documented manner from the city itself, and that has yet to be done. The information that has been on the city's website was really more focused on the impact to Little Gables, not the impact to Coral Gables. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Luciana Gonzalez.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Gonzalez. Welcome.

Ms. Gonzalez: Good afternoon. Can everyone hear me?

Mayor Lago: Yes ma'am.

Ms. Gonzalez: Good afternoon, Luciana Gonzalez, 4605 S.W. 12th Street, Little Gables resident. I would like to echo Kayla's comments just now. I think she covered pretty much a lot of what I was going to say. I just want to correct some things that were said through the public. We are the little people too. We are the residents of Little Gables and we're not developers, and we are not investors, we don't have vested interests in this neighborhood other than becoming a better community and being part of Coral Gables was the answer to that. A few years ago, Commissioner Rebecca Sosa voted, had another straw ballot just like this one was had, and 68 percent of the voters agreed that it should be part of Coral Gables, and I know that you represent Coral Gables residents, but please keep in mind Little Gables residents continue not to have a voice in this process. We are second class citizens because we're either seen as trailer park or we have to pay extra fees with Coral Gables. My kids go to Coral Gables Prep Academy. My kids go to Coral Gables Senior High School. I live and work – Coral Gables is my bubble and forgive me for being so passionate, but we work so hard to try to educate people on a very little budget, unlike what was mentioned earlier today, but we got our money together to try to do something that we think is part of a better community. I think sometimes it takes political leadership to see what the future can be for a municipality. This municipality is not here for five more years, this municipality will be here forever and to continue the legacy of George Merrick, who tried to buy Little Gables many, many,
City Commission Meeting
August 27, 2024

many decades ago and thanks to one single person who refused to sell to George Merrick, Little Gables was never part of Coral Gables. It was always meant to be part of Coral Gables, and I think that political leadership takes a lot and just in the words of a neighbor, he said, imagine if the Louisiana Purchase didn't go through or everything that this country has done in a small cossum here, we are in the same position. You, political leaders are in a position to envision the future of Coral Gables to protect its residents, to control development under SB102, which is a very real thing and North Gables residents should have a louder voice in this matter. So, straw vote, but not really a straw vote now. It was dead on arrival when all associated costs were included in this. Who in their right mind will ever vote yes on a ballot question that says all associated costs. So, thank you very much and I apologize for my extra enthusiasm, but I feel very passionate about this and please consider this in the future.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Alright. So, we have a motion and a second on the floor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Castro: Yes

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Mayor Lago: No

(Vote: 4-1)