

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-2
January 25, 2022
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 Works Director, Hermes Diaz

Assistant Public Works Director, Green Space Div. Deena Bell Llewellen

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-2 [Start: 12:53 p.m.]

Discussion regarding maintenance of City trees for removal of dead, diseased or damaged branches and strangler figs or other Ficus specimens. (Sponsored by Commissioner Anderson)

Mayor Lago: Let's move onto G-2 and we'll come back to G-1, I've got to get a document.

Commissioner Anderson: Okay. There are a few photos staff has to bring up of trees. I know you'll be shocked I'm bringing up trees again. Is Deena available? Commissioner Menendez that's the tree that you sent a picture in, I think its Catalonia.

Commissioner Menendez: Right.

Commissioner Anderson: Just to give you a frame of reference of location.

Commissioner Menendez: Thank you.

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Commissioner Anderson: I didn't go everywhere in the city to take pictures, but for purposes of demonstrating an issue.

Commissioner Menendez: I'm here to help...

Commissioner Anderson: I know you are. So is Deena, she's the utmost authority on some of these issues. I want to wait for the Mayor to get back. That's Segovia – the trees are a little less leafy because of the season, but there is a purpose of this comparison. When you look to the left you compare the size of the canopy to the one to the right, and it shows what happens to a tree when its not maintained. The center of that tree has been with dead branches for past the last hurricane it was damaged and not trimmed out, after two trimming cycles. So, the tree itself is in more of a state of decline. Oh, you brought your binders in.

Mayor Lago: I have to make a point.

Commissioner Anderson: You know when I fist met you that binder was almost that big. Has it grown?

Mayor Lago: Its growing.

Commissioner Anderson: Its growing. Okay. So, I brought up trees.

Mayor Lago: Yes.

Commissioner Anderson: There's an amputated arm. I'm not going to say where it is, but this is for the purposes of showing what happens to branches that you trim that way and if we keep flicking through, you'll see that they just don't grow. They rot back into the trunk and our staff does a fantastic job, but I think they need a little more flexibility to direct the trimming crews what to do and to more vigorously enforce either residential amputations. See how that branch is dead. It was whacked and then it died back to the trunk and now that rot is going to start going into the trunk and effecting the health of the tree. If you look carefully at it, you can see that – go back to the Mahogany with the Strangler Fig in it. There is a method to my madness here.

Public Works Director Diaz: We see a lot of that in Miracle Mile.

Commissioner Anderson: Go back – right there. If you look carefully at that, there is a branch that was cut off and it rotted back into the trunk. So, it made a wonderful planting site for Stranger Fig. If the trimming crews are out there really looking at the health of the tree, long before that branch broke off on Catalonia, there would have seen that there was a weakened condition there that was dangerous. Its probably the reason I trim my own fruit trees, because I like to look at the condition of the branches and so forth, but they need to be our eyes and ears out there and look for these conditions going forward, and not do the hat racking that you saw that the branch will never survive. Doesn't have enough foliage at the end of it to be able to keep that branch alive and then

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rots back into the trunk and destroys the health of the tree. I've asked Deena to give us some guidance on what her department can do going forward to enhance the canopy of our trees with the crews that we have. This is not criticism for now, because I know we have shortage of a crew, but planning for the future. Let's not just lollipop the trees. Let's not just uplift the canopy. Let's look inside the trees and get rid of the crossing branches, the dead branches, so we don't have this rot back occurring.

Assistant Director Bell-Llewellen: Deena Bell-Llewellen, Green Space Management Division of Public Works. For the record, I'm a certified arborist and a licensed landscape architect, so I'll do my best to answer your questions Commissioner. What we do currently for tree maintenance in the right-of-way, we have about 40,000 city right-of-way trees in the green spaces. We have a city contractor, Superior Landscape who has seven crews active. We have tree pruning on cycles, according to zones throughout the city. We have five different zones set up. We get through the zones on an average of two to four years for tree pruning, depending on the tree species. So, tree species plays a key element in how often we trim a tree. Also, we won't trim more than 20 percent to 25 percent of a canopy at any one time. We use our certified arborist and arborist practices to make sure we prune trees correctly. The city focuses on health, safety and welfare for tree pruning. When we get tree pruning requests for a resident, we go out to site visit and assess that with our arborist to make sure we are following those guidelines. We do not prune city trees just for aesthetics, like when we get requests from residents to maybe over prune a tree, to make it more balance or more aesthetic, or perhaps a popular request is to cut the tree vertically up and down at the property line. That's the photographs you are showing when you call it amputated. We will not do that as a city service, because that's improper pruning. So, moving forward, we are making sure to use our very experienced arborist staff that really know arboriculture to make these decisions. When residents want to prune their own tree, they submit a tree pruning permit to us. They must submit that permit application with an arborist report that we review on site with their arborist to ensure that they are doing the proper pruning.

Commissioner Anderson: Now with development projects sometimes you see that there is a need to bring back a large branch and that's one of my concerns as well, so we don't end up with some of the trees like you saw in those photos. They just end up like a dead stump going into the trunk. I'd ask that you let us know if you need something from us to avoid this happening in the future. Do you need more Code Enforcement help? What is it that you need? We're all in favor of maintaining our tree canopy.

Assistant Director Bell-Llewellen: With Code Enforcement daily, Code Enforcement engages our arborist and our division almost daily to do site visits, to determine where poor pruning practices is happening, to determine if its an enforcement violation or not. We just had one more staff member join our team. He's also an arborist. He actually worked in the City of New Orleans for four or five years. Very knowledgeable about trees, aging trees and especially hurricanes and storm damage to trees. I'll mention that hurricane Irma did a lot of damage to our tree canopy that we are just seeing now. Five years later, we are just seeing the dead wood, which is some of the photos you were showing. Now you've got to go back through the city and really look for more dead wood that we are just discovering was storm damage.

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Commissioner Anderson: Right. Right. I've had that discussion with staff many years ago where I say, instead of leaving the splintered branch up there, it would be better to do a clean cut at an angle, so it doesn't rot back in. So that's it.

Assistant Director Bell-Llewellen: Any questions.

Public Works Director Diaz: If I may add, and one of the recurring issues that we have all the time is, Miami-Dade County doesn't do, they do reactive maintenance on the trees, and I said Miracle Mile, I meant to say Coral Way, and all county, a number of county roads that have significant canopy and is something that we've got to be constantly on top of them because they don't really do, they definitely don't do the level of maintenance that we do.

Commissioner Anderson: That makes our city special.

Public Works Director Diaz: Absolutely.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner, I want to say thank you for putting this on the agenda. This is something that's close to my heart as you can tell by what I'm talking about that's happening in our downtown. Last night I sent over to Suramy and to Deena some trees that were missing in the downtown. Just because they go missing, doesn't mean they shouldn't be replaced. At the end of the day someone's responsible for that. Someone signed a development agreement ten years ago, fifteen years ago, and we've got to hold those people accountable. So, when you are talking about trees across the board, listen, you have my support unconditionally. So, thank you and continue moving forward on that front.

Assistant Director Bell-Llewellen: We appreciate the support. Very passionate about the tree canopy in the city. Its my honor to say we have 44 percent tree canopy. We've studied it and measured that, and I believe in the whole State of Florida there is one other major city that exceeds us is Gainesville.

Mayor Lago: And by the way, since you got on board, in the position that you're in, first off just the fact that you're a trained arborist, there is a different level of responsiveness that I'm grateful for. Thank you.

Commissioner Anderson: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you for that.

Assistant Director Bell-Llewellen: Thank you.