

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item C
May 20, 2025
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 Richard D. Lara

City Staff

City Attorney, Cristina Suárez
Acting City Manager, Joe Gomez
City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Tom Wells
Maria Cruz
Nicolas Cabrera
Roland Rodriguez
Jeff Kerstner
Gonzalo Sanabria
Barbara Perez
Rachel McCalley

Agenda Item C [10:39 a.m.]

Public Comment

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Tom Wells.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

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Mr. Wells: Good morning. My name is Tom Wells, I live at 1310 Coral Way. The last meeting, one Commission stated that elections cannot be bought. Here's a chart, Mr. Urquia is going to put up.

City Clerk Urquia: If Cable TV can please put up my screen. There you go.

Mr. Wells: Here's the chart of the donations made to each candidate in the recent election, together with how many votes they received in the General Election. Mayor Lago received \$478,000 and got less than 5,600 votes, that's \$86 per vote. Mr. Lara and Ms. Miro were second and third on the list. This chart does not include PAC payments. My self-funded campaign was under \$5 per vote. No mandate can exist when the Mayor was supported by only 11 percent of our residents. That means that an overwhelming 89 percent of residents did not support the Mayor despite the exorbitant contributions he received. This is a mandate that we are divided. Comments were made about voter suppression. When the elected officials not taking action to educate and engage voters, I fear that moving our local election to November will lower the percentage of informed voters. Here's an excerpt, next page, of an email that I sent to residents for specific things that the city could do to improve voter engagement and education. Refusing to do these things is voter suppression. Also, there's a question of whether the Commission has the authority to reduce the term of an elected official. There have been five Attorney General opinions issued as the municipality changing the date of its election to coincide with a federal, state, or county election. Each opinion authorizes extending the term of an elected official when changing the voting date. There is no support for shortening the term of an elected official. To be fiscally responsible of taxpayer money and avoid waste with unnecessary lawsuits, the Commission should either request an Attorney General opinion as to whether it has the authority to shorten the term of an elected official set forth in the Charter or seek a referendum approving such shortened term. I will give the Clerk a legal memo of my research at the end of my comments. Finally, when I canvassed and met with residents, I was told there was hostility issues between elected officials. No resident told me that they wanted to be excluded from providing input for a specific agenda item during discussion, and based on the last meeting, civility between elected officials remains an issue. Please focus on bringing our community together, how elected officials interact with each other, and encouraging resident input during our meetings. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

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

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road, a resident since 1976. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. I trust that today will be a great day for our city. Afterall, this is the first regular Commission meeting after the election. During the campaign, several words and phrases were repeated time and time again – civility, congeniality, over-development, respect, listening to the residents, independent voting, working together. We never heard vindictiveness,
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maybe it should have been brought up. The voters will be paying attention. They are anxious to see that they were not given false promises. They expect the people that ran for office to do what they promised to do and let me read the words again, civility, congeniality, over-development, respect, listening to the residents, independent voting, working together. The ball is in your court. Please do not demonstrate that it was politics as usual and that it was fraud what the voters were told.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Nicolas Cabrera.

Mr. Cabrera: Good morning members of the Commission. My name is Nicolas Cabrera, and I reside at 45 Antia Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida. I'm here today to express my concerns regarding the proposed expedited permit review services program. While I understand the intention behind this initiative, I believe it falls short of addressing the core issues within our permitting system. Issues that have long impacted both residents and business owners who face significant delays in securing approvals. In my view, this proposal functions more as a temporary patch rather than a meaningful fix. A 15 percent premium for faster review essentially creates a two-tiered system benefiting only those who can afford to pay more without solving the root cause of inefficiency within the department. I respectfully urge this Commission to reconsider the program and instead focus on holistic reforms that can bring lasting improvements to the permitting process, making it more equitable, transparent, and effective for everyone in our community. That said, I'm genuinely encouraged by the new energy and leadership we are seeing on this Commission. I'd like to commend you all for the recent May 6th Special Meeting. It was a well-run and productive and it gave many of us hope for a more constructive path forward. The last two years brought considerable turmoil to the City of Coral Gables, an incessant stream of scandals and controversy, a failed mayoral recall that prompted a state investigation and now that I think about it, a series of shady fishing emails from an organization called People Count USA. That is far as I recall sends surveys to residents using hidden tracking links. Since I'm on that item, I'd like to address Commissioner Fernandez. Many in the community seem to think you had something to do with those emails. So, in an effort to build public trust, feel like now is good opportunity for you, Commissioner, to address these rumors. Did you have anything to do with People Count USA?

Commissioner Fernandez: Madam City Attorney, don't we have a policy where all comments need to be directed to the Mayor.

City Attorney Suarez: Correct. Comments should be addressed to the Commission as-a-whole, not to individual members.

Mr. Cabrera: Well, in that case, through the Mayor, if I may, I'd like to ask if Commissioner Fernandez if he can address my question regarding People Count USA.

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Mayor Lago: Would you like to answer that Commissioner.

Commissioner Fernandez: I don't have any comment at this time. I'm not even sure what People Count USA is.

Mr. Cabrera: Very well. Refuse to answer. In that case, I conclude my public comments, and I thank you all for your time.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Next time, if we could, please let's make sure that we refrain from mentioning individual Commissioners by name. Yes ma'am, am I good. Perfect. Thank you very much.

City Clerk Urquia: Roland Rodriguez.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Rodriguez how are you sir. Good morning.

Mr. Rodriguez: Good morning, Mayor, Vice Mayor, Commissioners. My name is Roland Rodriguez. I reside at 3310 Alhambra Circle. I'm also a business owner at 6 Palermo Avenue in Coral Gables. I'm here to speak on item F-13, which is the installation of sidewalks along Alhambra Circle. This item has been going on for over two years now that I've been involved. I've been up here more times than I would have liked. So, I'm here to ask the Commission to please vote on the resolution. This is a resolution that the residents want. This resolution came about last year, as far as the design that's currently being proposed on the resolution. There was an official ballot that was sent out to all the residents, all the residents were unanimous in the vote, and this ballot was ignored. The design is a safe design. There's been comments upon the Commission. We respectfully disagree with those comments. The design has been looked at by your engineers. I'm an engineer myself. It meets all the standards and engineering judgement in regard to safety, location and as far as meeting all requirements of ADA. Not only that, but it also protects our trees. The previous design that was being looked at behind the trees eliminated over six or seven trees. This not only disturbs the canopy in our neighborhood, it takes away the character of our neighborhood. Our last Commission in March, what was it, arborist city, a tree city, many accolades to the city and now we want to go ahead and kill seven trees, just because we want to put it behind the trees, when there is a viable solution to put it in front of the trees. Again, your engineers have looked at it. It is an engineering decision that's safe and meets all the requirements. Unfortunately, I will not get to speak when the item comes up, so I'm making my points now. My neighbors are also unanimous in this decision and wanted to move forward, and again, we respectfully ask for the Commission as-a-whole to vote in favor of this resolution. Thank you. One last thing. Commissioner Castro brought something up about a resolution for Peter Iglesias. Our family and myself are all in favor of that, of bringing our City Manager back. And lastly, I'd like to congratulate Vice Mayor Anderson, Mayor Lago and Richard Lara on your appointments and

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re-elections, and I can guarantee you that none of our votes, none of our friends' votes, my votes, or our family members' votes were bought. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jeff Kerstner.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir. Thank you for being here.

Mr. Kerstner: Good morning. My name is Jeff Kerstner, 545 San Estaban Avenue. I understand there is a resolution, F-15, coming up later today dealing with traffic enforcement and pedestrian safety in the Italian Village area, primarily to the west of Coral Gables High School, that's been sponsored by Commissioner Castro. As a member of the Mayor's Advisory Council, we received an early draft of these proposed topics and I've been asked to represent the Council to voice our support for these types of measures. The safety issues that are identified in this resolution align perfectly with walkability and pedestrian safety priorities that our council has been actively addressing. Over the past several months, we collaborated with multiple stakeholders, including Miami-Dade School Board officials, district employees, the Coral Gables High School Principal and staff, Public Works and the University of Miami's Walk Safe Program, in order to kind of analyze and recommend comprehensive solutions. Our investigation confirms the concerns raised by residents, inadequate sidewalk connectivity on Riviera Drive, Granada, and other collector streets. The lack of mobility lanes for safe bike and micromobility devices, inconsistent enforcement during dismissal hours, and significant pedestrian safety risk, affecting not just the students who walk from home, but also the hundreds more who get dropped off in the vicinity and must navigate these areas on foot. While this specific resolution focuses on enforcement, and that is a crucial component, the Mayor's Advisory Council will be presenting additional recommendations at an upcoming meeting that compliment this resolution with long-term infrastructure options. We applaud this collaborative approach to student and resident safety and urge support for this and other resolutions as an important first step toward comprehensive improvements around Coral Gables High School. I apologize on behalf of the Chair of the Council that wasn't able to be here and asked me to present these in his name. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Jeff, if I may.

Mr. Kerstner: Yes sir.

Mayor Lago: First off, I want to commend you and the Chair and the entire Board and the staff for working hard on this. Quick question, how long have you been working on this, because you're the one that came up with this idea and made it a priority on the Mayor's Council.

Mr. Kerstner: Yes. I was given the Chairperson of the Walkability Committee within the Council, and we've been working on it for several months, since the beginning of the year.

Mayor Lago: The reason why I put that on the record is because I want people to really understand what the purpose of the Mayor's Council. Two years we put together a beautiful app to benefit the community and now we're working on a bunch of different items that are just, again, all good things for our community. And while there is a lot of disagreement on the Commission, on this issue there is collaboration. I think it's an opportunity for myself and Commissioner Castro to work on an issue that the Mayor's Council has been working on for some time, while these are just issues of enforcement, we are going to move it to another level of doing issues with real infrastructure. So, I want to commend you on coming forward and speaking about this issue, and I hope that we continue to collaborate on the efforts that are being proposed. I think that it's a win-win for the students on all fronts. Thank you for that.

Mr. Kerstner: Look forward to working with you. Thank you.

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

City Clerk Urquia: Gonzalo Sanabria.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir.

Mr. Sanabria: Good morning. It's refreshing to see a new face.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Sanabria, please state your name and address for the record.

Mr. Sanabria: My name is Gonzalo Sanabria, 944 San Pedro Avenue of Gables by the Sea. Record numbers voted in this last election for Mayor Lago, Vice Mayor Anderson, and our new face in the place, a wonderful addition Commissioner Lara. Thank you and congratulations. But we do have a problem that we need to address. We have a problem of a transgression of power, of a threat unprecedented. In the history of Coral Gables and also in all towns that I have been a participant, as a member of the audience, or presiding over boards for 55 years, I've been doing this in my profession, thousands of meetings. I requested a Government in the Sunshine request, if there's an unprecedented issue where a member of the Commission, you, Ariel Fernandez, threatened me with legal action sitting as a Commissioner and this demands a reprimand, because what's happening now our image as a Commission, as a body as a city is tarnished. We've been called the "Banana Republic," and they mentioned constantly what Ariel Fernandez has done to this Commission. I request that you do that because it falls into two sections; one is called malfeasants,

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the other one is called misfeasants, and those are unprecedented transgressions that the city does not require. It requires a new image. It needs to go back to where it was. I hope that this body in the spirit of saving the image that they've had for a total century goes back and issues a reprimand on this matter and by that I close my comments. I appreciate it.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, sir. Madam City Attorney, on that item, what options does the Commission have?

Mr. Sanabria: I would like to play a video that I left. Will the City Clerk on this please.

City Clerk Urquia: If Cable TV will please play the video Mr. Sanabria submitted for the record.

[Video Playing – Commissioner Fernandez: *“Mr. Sanabria, you will be hearing from my attorney in the next few hours regarding your complaint which was a frivolous complaint filed with the Ethics Commission, and we will be pursuing legal charges and legal fees when it comes to your complaint.”*

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Madam City Attorney, what options does the Commission have?

City Attorney Suarez: Mayor, right now we're in the midst of public comment. My recommendation would be to continue with public comment and if the Commission has individual questions, we can discuss later, but this is not something that we have considered or even have been asked to consider.

Mayor Lago: Would any member of the Commission like to make a comment on this issue?

Vice Mayor Anderson: Through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Yes ma'am, Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I think it's regrettable that in the past comments of this nature were made, but I think it's incumbent upon us to move forward and not go backwards but move forward and hopefully this type of transgression does not occur again.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Anyone else.

Commissioner Lara: Yes, I've got a comment. So, when I watched the exchange between Commissioner Fernandez during Public Hearing, frankly, I was taken aback because as a practicing attorney and as a litigator for over 25 years, there are countless ways to address redress, if you've got a claim against somebody if you think you've got legal rights to assert against another individual. The better course, for sure, would have been to write privately to the person you are claiming against, and have your attorney write to their attorney privately. You wouldn't give up a

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single thing regarding your rights, but you would do it in a way that would be not inflammatory, or more importantly, have I believe, whether intentional or not, a chilling effect for those observing the proceedings, who watched as I did a threat to come after a resident for asserting what he believed was a claim that he had to run through the process. To make those statements with all respect to my colleague, it epitomizes what could be described as, you know, speaking from the bully pulpit and wilding power, whether you knew it or not, from the dais in a way that was an absolute disadvantage and unfortunate and indefensible position to put a resident in who came to speak during public comment. What I would not want to see is a repeat of that, but I would not want to see is us act like it didn't happen and I have all the faith, all the faith and all the confidence that we will not see a repeat of that.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Commissioner. Commissioner Fernandez, would you like to apologize to Mr. Sanabria for your comments on the record.

Commissioner Fernandez: Unfortunately, Mr. Mayor that is still a pending case with the Ethics Commission, so I cannot direct any comments to Mr. Sanabria at this time, according to the Ethics Commission until that case has been satisfied.

Mayor Lago: An apology wouldn't hurt your ethics case.

Commissioner Fernandez: If it came off...

Mayor Lago: I didn't recognize you. You have to ask me to speak. We are going to follow the rules.

Commissioner Fernandez: You just asked me to speak.

Mayor Lago: I did not. I made a statement.

Commissioner Fernandez: Okay. So, through the Mayor.

Mayor Lago: One second. Mr. Sanabria, Mr. Fernandez is not willing to apologize. I'm more than willing to be a bigger man here as the Mayor of the city and apologize on his behalf. Just like the Vice Mayor and just like the Commissioner said, that type of behavior is unacceptable, and it will not continue, and it will not continue to be the face of this Commission. So, at the end of the day, I apologize on behalf of the city for that type of behavior. You should never have been threatened in the middle of a Commission meeting. I think it's inappropriate and again, it shows the type of Commission we were two years ago. We are moving forward. So, I apologize for that. Thank you very much. Mr. Clerk, next item, next speaker, excuse me.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker, Mr. Mayor is Barbara Perez.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

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Ms. Perez: My name is Barbara Perez, and I live at 210 Romano Avenue, and I have been an active participant on boards in the city for definitely more than ten years, I was on the Landscape Beautification Advisory Board until I was termed out, and I'm currently on completing my second term on the Economic Development Board. I am here to speak on an item that's not on the agenda, but I just want to make a comment about a welcome packet that was made for the residents and I did not participate or attend by Zoom or otherwise the Special Meeting that you all had on the 6th, that I guess was dealt with at that time. But I want to say that I don't understand what the problem was with the welcome packet. I actually never saw it, but I think we do live in the City Beautiful, but the City Beautiful comes with a lot of rules and regulations that new residents have no clue about. I have a new neighbor that moved in, in October, and I actually they're not just our neighbors, I was their realtor that sold the house, that listed the house, and I actually came to the city in search of information to help them with regard to what they could do, what they couldn't do, and there was nothing, and all I could do was tell them what I knew as a resident since 1995. So, perhaps that's something that the Commission can revisit that it is something important for new residents coming into the city to know what it is that they can and cannot do in order to keep the city beautiful and not get a Code Enforcement warning or violation. So that's one thing. I also want to make a comment about the permit expediting process that's been introduced. Again, as a resident, I understand it comes with additional fees, and I do agree the comment that was made by Mr. Cabrera that the issue with permitting that I think its probably the biggest pet-peeve for lack of a better word for any new or old resident in the city, but it is quite a laboring task to get a permit in the city. So if there is any process that could assist, whether it's, like Mr. Cabrera said, a full rehaul of the system, perhaps separating residential from commercial reviews might assist the process on both ends to go faster, but I do think whether it's the proposal that's on the table with regard to permit expediting or otherwise it is something that definitely needs to be addressed. And finally, I was actually participating by Zoom, but fortunately I live close enough that I can come in person. When the issue of the City Manager came up, I actually wanted to come in person. I think it is concerning, to say the least, that Mr. Parjus suddenly resigned from his position after the election results. Oh, my time is up. Okay. My time is up but I will say that I want to echo comments that I believe Commissioner Anderson and the Mayor, you made when we've been having this revolving door with City Manager that the proper procedure to follow is to do a national search to find the most qualified candidate and I have nothing against Mr. Iglesias, but I think, to be blunt, it would be a joke to just have him reappointed back as City Manager. I think the proper procedure for our city is to follow what you all recommended originally which was to do a national search.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Castro: Through the Mayor, if I can provide some responses.

Mayor Lago: Go ahead.

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Commissioner Castro: Okay. So, the welcome packet, I wasn't here, I was under surgery when there was the Special Commission Meeting, which was a resolution which changed language and funding for me to be able to keep on providing that welcome package. I'm going to have one of my liaisons actually come out here and give you a welcome package because I spent so much time putting all that information together. Now, I was listening to some of the comments the Commission was saying regarding the welcome packet, and some of them were kind of concerning and I was kind of taken back a little bit because they were saying that it was something that was already done, that I mean, my welcome packet I think cost me for a year and-a-half may be a thousand something dollars, that's the amount of funds that I'm really using to send my welcome packet. One of the comments that were said was that this was already being done or that it was being done by somebody else. So, I wrote to the City Clerk yesterday and I have his – I'll take a screen shot of this conversation you and I had for the public and I asked them, "Good morning, Billy, is there a welcome packet that the city sends out to new residents", and he responded, "not that I'm aware of ma'am." And I said, "well how can I be 100 percent sure." And he responded, "I'll ask around." He responds, "Economic Development sends an email to new businesses not residents. Commissioner Fernandez sends to new businesses also, not residents. I couldn't find anyone other than your office who sends anything to new homeowners. The last person who ever sent new homeowners a welcome packet was Mayor Cason." And what a shame that I wasn't here to be able to defend my welcome packet, but maybe at some point I can go ahead and bring this back, even if it means that I'm going to go ahead and pay it from my pocket, I will continue to send my welcome packages on my personal behalf because I think it's a great benefit to the city. And the questions you had about the expedited program. I put together a whole presentation so that there is no confusion, and I answered all the questions the elected officials had concerns with. I'll go ahead and step out and I'll give you a welcome package which I'm pretty sure that you are really going to enjoy. Thank you for your comment.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Moving on Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, I'm going to Zoom next. Next speaker is Rachel McCalley and I'm asking her to please unmute.

Ms. McCalley: Good morning, everyone.

Mayor Lago: Good morning.

Ms. McCalley: I think my camera is working. Unfortunately, I couldn't be here in person, but I'm looking forward to speaking with everyone over Zoom, and my name is Rachel McCalley. I live at 10 Aragon Avenue, Apartment 1205. So, I just wanted to speak about Phillips Park and the potential funding cut that it may have. So, at first it may appear fiscally responsible in the short term to divert funds from the park to other uses. I think doing so would be a strategic misstep that really undermines Coral Gables long term financial health and competitiveness in this market. So,
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I think we all know that the greater Miami area is really experiencing an influx of new residents and with this growth it really comes like fierce competition between cities and suburbs to attract and really retain high quality residents and investment. So, families, professionals are choosing where to settle based on a few key factors of quality of life. So really those three things are, a really strong school system, low crime, and access to safe appealing public spaces, those specifically parks. For my opinion, Coral Gables really excels in two of these three areas, but by enhancing our park system, I really think we can complete the trifecta here, and a well-maintained accessible park system is not just a nice to have, I really think it's a proven driver of residential and commercial appeal. So really investing in our parks now is an investment in the city's long term revenue base. The new residents, these new businesses drawn here by the improved public amenities will generate far more in property taxes, sales tax, economic development and activity, in the short-term savings that we would see by reallocating these funds. So, really what I'm trying to say is that, in short, the park will pay for itself over time. So, I think today and in the future when you're thinking about the budget of cutting from Phillips Park, I think you really need to think about Coral Gables long term future and really cutting this funding may look smart on paper, but I think it would really cost us far more in missed opportunities in the long term financial success of Coral Gables. So that is all I have to say but thank you everyone for listening to me and I really hope you reconsider cutting the funding from Phillips Park.

Mayor Lago: Thank you very much.

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

Mayor Lago: Alright. Perfect. Then we'll close the public comment.