

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item D – Public Comments
May 9, 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

Public Speaker(s)

Dr. Andy Gomez

Maria Cruz

Freddy Balsera

Rafael Gomez

Gordon Sokoloff

Thad Adams

Agenda Item D [10:15 a.m.]

Public Comments

Mayor Lago: Before we move onto Mayor’s Comments, I want to move onto the Public Comment section – Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, the first speaker today is Dr. Andy Gomez.

Mayor Lago: Dr. Gomez, good morning.

Dr. Gomez: Good morning Mr. Mayor, Commissioners. I’m Andy Gomez, long time resident of Coral Gables and I can promise you, you won’t have to take a picture with me today.

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[Laughter]

Dr. Gomez: Let me first take the opportunity to congratulate our two new Commissioners, Commissioner Castro, welcome.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you so much.

Dr. Gomez: Commissioner Fernandez, what an honor, I've known you for so long, my dear friend.

Commissioner Fernandez: Thank you doctor.

Dr. Gomez: Congratulations. I have served the city for over 40 years. I've been the Mayor's appointee five times; I have worked for four City Managers. I'm here today and I usually, as both of you know me, I work behind the scenes. Seldom do I come to the dais to speak on an issue, unless I feel it's extremely important. And today I'm here to speak in support of our City Manager, Peter Iglesias, who over the years I have gotten to know and work very closely with. In my 40 years in senior positions in higher education, from Under Secretary of Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, where I controlled a \$1.9 billion dollar budget and over 100,000 employees, to my positions at the University of Miami as Dean of International Studies and Assistant Provost for Academic Affairs. I have always, before making a decision, a tough decision, study the issues, but more importantly surround myself with very capable people, as you have with the City Manager. A man of high integrity, a man that is extremely qualified, a man that today, has the city in the position of having a reserve of over \$50 million dollars, when not too long ago, it was only half a million dollars. A man that has the city in triple A rating in Wall Street, but more importantly, a man that is highly respected by his senior staff that have the privilege of working with. My last post appointed by Mayor Lago was on the Retirement Board, which I just stepped down last month after a long, and I don't need to tell you those that have been around, we had a great deal of problems with our retirement pension system. Pete was instrumental in working with me and the members of that board in bringing it to a level that is safe, and respectable. Think about this. The City of Coral Gables years ago, not too long ago, was the second poorly funded pension board in the entire State of Florida. Not today. And a lot of that credit goes to Peter Iglesias and his senior staff. But at the same time, Peter and I have not agreed all the time on everything and that's fine, but what I found in Peter Iglesias was that I was able to walk into his office, openly discuss the issues and be able to compromise in a solution and moving forward. I always left his office with a good decision that benefited the citizens of Coral Gables. He always puts the citizens of Coral Gables first. And let's be very clear too, the citizens of Coral Gables have voted and they want change, and Commissioner Castro, Commissioner Fernandez, you are two of those individuals, you are the two individuals and I have to tell you, Commissioner, as a senior citizen, I am more happier than you can imagine when I heard you put on one of your top priorities fixing streets and sidewalks. I have problems as an old man walking on some of the sidewalks. You as a Commission are responsible for setting policy. The Manager implements and recommends to you.

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I believe that it's a bit premature, with all due respect, to discuss the termination of our City Manager without having the opportunity of setting a new agenda with you two new Commissioners, and then in due diligence be able to evaluate whether his performance has been adequate enough to your satisfaction. So, I humbly suggest that you take a step back, consider the important decisions that you have in front of you, and move forward in the best interest of all the citizens of Coral Gables and be able to give this City Manager the respect that he deserves for keeping this city as one of the jewels in our state. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you Dr. Gomez, I appreciate it. I'm just going to take a personal point of privilege. While I appreciate people clapping on one side or the other, let's remember that we're in a Commission meeting and I want to point it out now, not point it out later. We are trying to conduct the city's business and we want to move in a positive direction. So, I apologize. Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cruz, good morning, the floor is yours.

Ms. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. I was wondering sitting back there, since I was the very first one, the very first non-employee, non-Commissioner, to walk into this Chamber today, and to turn in my cards, I was wondering why we move the public comments ahead and why we moved over the first person that put in the card. Now I know why. That's alright. People have powers and they exercise them. I'm here today, let me compose myself because I'm a little ticked off for how we play games.

Commissioner Fernandez: If I may pause you for a question. Mr. Clerk, how do we decide on the order in which speakers speak?

City Clerk Urquia: Its in the order I receive the cards, sir.

Ms. Cruz: I'm sorry, when he came in, my cards were there, and I was the first one here, I'm sorry.

City Clerk Urquia: Mistake, ma'am.

Ms. Cruz: I'm sorry. Conversation was held, because I was here watching. That's alright. I'm here, first of all to tell you what a wonderful day it is in Coral Gables today, but I have to temper that with comments, because you know what, as much as some people thought little groups can make a difference, as long as some people, the people that had been here all along, you know they have the power, as much as all the elected officials, most past electeds, even staff members, high staff members, put all their money on the developer's choices and support it, candidates for the past election, I need to tell you a very well known statement that some important people have used before, elections have consequences, and in this city, regardless of what people think, there's 50,000 people only so many voted, guess what, the election happened and it was certified much to

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the disgust of some people sitting here today; and guess what, the people spoke and we requested change, and I'm sorry that I was preempted by people that think that change doesn't mean make change. Change means let's wait and see. We lived here 40 years, but we need to wait and see what's going to happen next before we correct. No. Wrong. People, the people, the taxpayers, the residents of this city that chose to vote, because if you chose not to vote you can't say anything, and the people sitting here cannot say, oh, but you didn't get the votes from everybody, because everybody didn't vote. Well, everybody never votes in this city, so that is not fair, okay, and I'm going to tell you something, I'm tired of people that get elected, I'm tired of people that are paid staff members getting involved with elections and trying to suppress people's votes by bullying and by intimidation. That is wrong. And today, today, you will see people here and last night you saw how the crowd there are demanding change, not tomorrow, not next year, not 15 years from now, now; and whether you listen or not, its up to you, and there are people here that are not newbies, that have been here and have seen the people talking, its about time that you listen to the people that the establishment lost. I'm sorry, but I have a few more minutes. The establishment lost; the people that wanted the status quo lost; the people that paid a lot of money to get their projects go through lost; the people that did the dirty campaign lost; the people of Coral Gables won, and we expect all of you to listen to us, not just the people that were elected, all of you because that's your job. Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Next speaker is Freddy Balsera.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk, if I may, I repeat what I said before, either one side of the issue or the other, we have a lot of people that would like to speak, but let's please refrain from clapping. Thank you very much. Mr. Balsera, good morning.

Mr. Balsera: Good morning. First of all, congratulations to the new Commissioners on their election. I know its an exciting day for you and I know in Commissioner Fernandez' case, he's worked hard to get here. Hopefully, you being elected doesn't mean that we stop receiving the newsletters with all the insight into what's happening in the city. I'm a businessman in Coral Gables and a long-time resident. I don't lobby the city. I don't do business with the city. I'm not a vendor with the city. I don't build in the city, and I give that as a bit of context because I'm here truly as a citizen. I don't come to City Hall often, and I'm somebody that has spoken out, as some of you know when I think things are going in the wrong direction and we can do better. When I was on the Budget Advisory Board and Dave Brown was the City Manager, my friend Dave Brown, and he was recommending a tax millage increase, was the first time ever that the Budget Advisory Board voted against the Manager's recommendation and against the budget, because I thought it was the wrong thing to do. When I saw that the Police Department was heading in the wrong direction, and the city was unsafe, I spoke out. When I thought that the previous city administration was also not serving the residents the way that they should have and was not giving people the opportunity to voice their opinions and have access to their government, I also spoke

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out. I have been reading Commissioner Fernandez' priorities, I think that there's a lot of important things in the list of priorities that helped get you elected that align with the priorities of a lot of residents and a lot of your colleagues on this Commission. But in the case of the City Manager, I have to respectfully disagree with you. I think that you have a City Manager that is a true professional, somebody that is attentive to the citizens, somebody that is doing important work, somebody that stays on the sidelines of politics, and tries to manage the city and its operations professionally, taking direction, of course, from you all. I believe that a lot of the priorities and frustrations that Commissioner Fernandez has raised are really public policy items. They are not so much administrative items. I think that these are things that have not been addressed by past Commissions. I think that these are things that really aren't the responsibility of the one sitting up here, because for the most part all of you have been here for a relatively short period of time. There are things that we all know need to get fixed but haven't been fixed by the policymakers that lead this city and that they can get fixed through resolutions, through legislation and through the budget process which is coming up. So, a lot of these priorities can be addressed specifically as you allocate dollars and as you work to approve a budget, but I think that replacing the City Manager now would be a mistake and I think it creates an unnecessary disruption that is only going to impede, create obstacles for the kind of change that you all want to move forward with. I think you should stay the course and I urge you, Commissioner, to keep on fighting for those priorities, but in this particular case, to reconsider your position and work with your colleagues to address these public policy priorities that I know all of you are in alignment with and would like to move forward. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you Mr. Balsera, appreciate you being here.

City Clerk Urquia: Rafael Gomez.

Mayor Lago: Good morning, sir, how are you, the floor is yours.

Mr. Gomez: I'll try to make it quick. I'm a regular citizen, but I have lived in the City of Coral Gables for almost 50 years. I'm a general contractor and there's a lot of business I have done in the City of Coral Gables for almost 50 years. I knew Peter when he was in the structural, head of the structural department in the City of Coral Gables. I do work in the City of Miami Beach, Pinecrest, Miami Shores, Coral Gables, Coconut Grove. I don't know a city where you can walk into the office of the City Manager and be attended. I don't know a city where you can talk to the Mayor directly on a one-to-one. I really appreciate the way you are doing it and I appreciate the way you do it. I'm just a regular citizen. My wife has a business here in Coral Gables, my son has a bistro, a lot of people know it, right here next door, we are Coral Gables people. We love the fact that this is a community that you can walk and see any of you right at the door. Don't lose that because I think that's the most valuable thing in this city. By the way, I did vote for you, so did my family and I voted for you too. I hope that the changes that you are doing are the ones you

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promised to do, but by all means, this individual, I have walked into their office, as a regular citizen and I've been attended. Two days later, I get answers from them. I love your work and I congratulate you on your work. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Thank you. Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Gordon Sokoloff.

Mayor Lago: Doctor, welcome back.

Dr. Sokoloff: Hi, good morning. Its kind of difficult, it's a sticky subject regarding the City Manager, but I can't help but speak because I have strong convictions and ideas, and one of them is, you are a nice person, Mr. Iglesias, but its not only about serving the Commission, its about serving the residents; and the residents have spoken up very loudly about the mobility hub and I spoke about it last night at the meeting. Before I get to that, I'd like to just mention that many meetings ago, I spoke about the old Police Station which I thought was a great building and it was a preferred location for the Police Station, and it had better ingress and egress for the fire engines and it was told that it was going to cost about \$30 to \$40 million dollars to refurbish that building to make it usable again and I question why; why does this city ride the residents about keeping up our homes when you are on watch and letting that building fall into such disrepair to the point where you say, well, we've got to trash it and build a new one. And now, I learned that Bill Ussery is spending only \$3.5 million, maybe its more than that, but I don't think its \$30 or \$40 million, they are keeping the structure of that building and they are reutilizing it. I think that was a move that was a little bit nefarious. I don't know exactly the details, but to do that switch and have to build a new Police Station and let that building fall into disrepair was on your watch. Last night it was mentioned that the Venetian Pool, Salvadore Park, this very building, is in need of repair. So, there's a lot of things under your watch that, I think under the watch of you, things are falling short. Mobility Hub – what offends me, and I said it last night and I'll say it again, and I don't know if it's the Commission's fault for accepting it, but this City Manager presented one version only, one choice of this is what it's going to look like. He got it from an architect, he spent \$2.3 million dollars, and he gave you only one choice of a design; and the design is as much of a sore thumb in that neighborhood as the Plaza is on Ponce. The Plaza does not belong there. It belongs on the Las Vegas strip. And this building, this Mobility Hub is situated next-door directly to the Actor's Playhouse, the Miracle Theater, which is an iconic historic landmark, and you're putting this giant white monstrosity. I know parking is on the agenda, we can utilize maybe some more parking, but it can be just like the parking garage behind, across from Books and Books, something that Spanish Mediterranean. Every building that you have built does not have a Mediterranean design, and here we are, we have a Mediterranean bonus, something that we award developers. Why isn't the city leading by example and building their own buildings with a Mediterranean flair, that's what makes Coral Gables look like Coral Gables, and to not construct any of your buildings,

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including the new Public Safety Building, which is a white block and the addition that you did next-door here, and now this Mobility Hub which looks totally out of place and futuristic is not keeping with Coral Gables and George Merrick's vision. So, in my opinion, we could have a City Manager who has a better vision for our city for serving the residents in that way, and I move for change. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: If I may, I'd like to address some of the comments by the doctor, not here today. I'd just like to address them in the next Commission meeting. I think it's important that we clear the record. I would like for you, Mr. Clerk, if possible, in the next Commission meeting, Mr. Clerk, if you would do me a favor, please, in the next Commission meeting, I would like for our Director, Suramy Cabrera to provide the permit cost in regard to Bill Ussery, not \$3 million dollars. I'm in this industry, I know what it costs to build, especially in today's day and age. I would also please like for you to provide in the next Commission meeting an explanation from staff and the explanation is very simple. We moved the location to address our response times in the North Gables because we did not have a fire station over there. So, this improved where we are going to have the most growth in the city by building a Fire Station and Police Station in one building. It also allowed us the ability to move departments that were renting in other parts of the city into one building, and it also allowed us in the city, please and I'd like for you to get as much information so we can put it in a memo to our staff and we'll talk about it in the next Commission meeting, to have our police officers not have to leave the city to fire at renting facilities to get target practice and they can do that in our own facility. So, I want to be able to provide the information, the correct information that the doctor mentioned. I think it's important to put it on the record. I want it on the next Commission meeting.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir. Next speaker is Thad Adams.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Adams, good morning.

Mr. Adams: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, good morning, Commissioners, congratulations Commissioner Fernandez, congratulations Commissioner Castro on your election. My name is Thad Adams, I'm here on behalf of the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce, I have the pleasure to serve as Chair this year and have some comments here on our City Manager Peter Iglesias. Mark Trowbridge, unfortunately, is out ill today, but wishes to express the same comments that I'm about to make. So, over the years our Chamber has enjoyed a very productive and positive relationship with the City Manager since he took office, even when he was Assistant Manager. By the way, one of the best engineers that the city has had, which is one of the most important jobs in the entire city. He's made himself available to us on key issues, on key opportunities for our business community and he sought our council on numerous occasions. With the support of previous Commissions, this has been a most productive relationship, and the city remains in excellent financial health, with a terrific staff, and wonderful relationship with our Chamber. While

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we're certain there are always challenges not known to us and would agree that the city is well operated compared to most other municipalities, I think everyone would agree on that. I also had the pleasure to serve on the Economic Development Board, having been with the Beacon Council for ten years, have a good idea of what's going on there, and under Peter's leadership that's been a very effective department. So, working with the City Manager and his team who its business residents which consist, by the way, primarily of small businesses, to retain and create jobs is essential for all cities, including the City of Coral Gables, so the Chamber's effective working relationship with the City Manager and his staff has been a key element in our partnership for success. Thank you very much.

Mayor Lago: Thank you sir. Mr. Clerk.

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

Mayor Lago: Alright. We'll close the public comment, if there is nothing further and we'll move to the 10:30 time certain, agenda item G-2.