

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item G-2
May 11, 2021
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jorge L. Fors, Jr.

Commissioner Kirk R. Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Police Chief, Ed Hudak

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item G-2 [Start: 12:15 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission of Coral Gables, supporting the expansion of defensive tactics training for Coral Gables police officers and Police Department personnel. (Sponsored by Commissioner Fors)

Mayor Lago: Item G-2.

City Attorney Ramos: G-2 is a Resolution of the City Commission of Coral Gables, supporting the expansion of defensive tactics training for Coral Gables police officers and Police Department personnel.

Mayor Lago: Commissioner Fors the floor is yours.

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Agenda Item G-2 – Resolution supporting the expansion of defensive tactics Training for Coral Gables police officers and Police Department personnel

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Commissioner Fors: Thank you Mayor. First, I want to say that I don't the importance of this topic can be overstated. I think this goes to one of the most important functions that government performs which is policing. Its also an area that can lead to major liability for municipalities and for taxpayer dollars. All my life I've been involved in sports, like wrestling and things like that. As a result, I've always paid special attention when videos and footage come out from police officers forced to have physical encounters, not using lethal weapons with suspects or anybody really. And for years, my impression has been, and I know its not a unique opinion, that many police officers simply aren't given the tools necessary to develop the skills to be able to effectively engage in these encounters without injuring themselves or injuring the folks who they are trying to restrain. To me, its crazy that we don't have, and this is nationwide, that we don't have more expansive training in this skillset. Police officers, unlike an attorney or a banker or an auto mechanic are probably one of the few jobs, if not the only job where you're literally called upon to engage in physical situations with people, who in many cases are not cooperative. I was reading in the memorandum nominating Officer Pino, as Officer of the Month. It said, he confronted the offender head-on, gave verbal commands and took him into custody without further incident. That was a situation where Mr. Pino, and we all were lucky where we had a suspect that reacted to the verbal commands. But nobody in here, with the exception of maybe Chief Hudak, finds that type of interaction in their job description, because we call upon our police officers to do this, and because when they do so, they have, not only their own health and safety, but the health and safety of the people who they are forced to engage in this manner, in their hands. I began, especially after the highly publicized encounters that, in some cases were lethal, that we experienced last year, I began to think to myself, again more critically, why are we not giving our officers the opportunity to develop these skills, so that (a) they can be more confident, (b) they when forced to engage with individuals without lethal weapons, is a complete different situation. If a suspect draws a gun on an officer, we're not talking about this, in that case the officer is going to draw his gun in self-defense. We are talking about situations where they are not drawing their gun, they are not drawing their taser, and they are not receiving, in many cases the adequate training to be comfortable in that type of situation. I found out that the City Manager was thinking the exact same thing that I was, at the exact same time, probably because he also has a long background, lifelong background in these types of sports. I think in his case it was Judo, and something that he was always thinking about as well. We started working with the Police Department. I found out that we already have officers in our ranks who are Blackbelt in Jujitsu, who actually more than one of them own their own school where they taught in the past. Some Police Departments would have to go outside for this training, but we are lucky enough to actually have folks in-house already who are eager, more than eager to expand the training. I'm not going to, I'm going to let the professionals get into the details and the logistics of how we would go about implementing expanded defensive tactic training; and by the way, I think everybody is of the thinking that there is no special formula here. It's very simple – you develop the skills by just doing it more frequently. In many cases, these are

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some of the same skills that these officers are learning, except they are only doing it once a year. So, if you are only doing something once a year, you are simply not going to be that good at it in a situation where your life might depend on it or somebody else's life might depend on it. So, I think the gist of it, although the details are still being ironed out is, more or less the same training they are receiving, but just more frequently. After a few meetings with the City Manager and the Police Department and some of the gentlemen, the officers who would be leading the charge, in terms of expanding the training, I wanted to prepare a resolution and hopefully I get the support of my colleagues, which does not get into the specifics of implementing it, because that's still a work in progress, but signals to everybody that at least the policymakers up here, a majority of us, are supportive and are behind them in terms of working on that plan to provide these officers with an opportunity to develop their skills, instead of sort of, leaving it to them to use their own personal time to go and try to develop these skills that their life and safety may depend on in the future. So, for that reason, I propose this resolution. And if the Chief wants to add anything, City Manager wants to add anything, please go ahead.

Chief Hudak: The City Manager has been dying to get me on the Judo mats since I took over, so I'm just going to avoid him at all cost. Commissioner, to your point and Commission. There has been such a focus over the last ten years on police officer's de-escalation techniques on what we do. I submit to all of you that I believe that we also, as a society, every time we interact with the police, de-escalation needs to happen on both sides, hopefully God willing reduce some of the numbers that we have seen. That being said, I believe in discussions with you and the training of our officers that, when we have to escalate as police in Coral Gables, that we train on how we do it. We give our officers a lot of tools, the taser, the bolo wrap, that we brought forward things that we were the first to use for those less lethal, non-lethal ways to do it. This is a skillset, as you said and as the Manager knows, has to be practiced. We incorporate it in our training. Now with the facility that we have, we are able to do this and scheduling. The only real semantics that we are working on is, how we are going to move those trainers around, so we can get everybody familiar with doing it, and as I joke with the Manager, not just wearing a gee, but how do you do those moves when you are wearing a gun belt with a taser, with everything else that's on there. So, we are excited about it. We have a lot of Black Belts, we have resident experts that we are going to use, and I am fully on board as the rest of the members of the Police Department. We just appreciate, again, the support from the Commission that you are going to give us whatever we need to do our jobs as effectively as we possibly can to protect the residents and the citizens.

Commissioner Fors: And I'll add something Chief. I didn't cite it in my resolution, because only a few departments around the country, very few, I think there is only one we know of, maybe more than one, has actually started to expand their training, so that is not really scientific yet, but they report less instances of drawing their weapon, less injury by suspects were apprehended, and I

really view a development of these types of skills to be a tool precisely for de-escalation. So when you have an officer who is not comfortable accomplishing what needs to be accomplished with a particular suspect who may be unruly or uncooperative, that officer in the heat of the moment may be more likely, feeling less comfortable in those non-lethal skills, to draw their weapon, which then leads to situations like we continue to see in the news which could result in liability for the city, as well as the unnecessary loss of life. So, I certainly view it as a de-escalation measure. So, thank you.

City Manager Iglesias: Commissioner Fors, I agree with everything you said so far. And Chief Hudak, you can have all the things your bolo wraps and taser and everything you want, but if the mindset is not there, if that person does not have control over himself that's not going to work. And the only way that you can do this is through training; you can't train one time of year and expect people to react correctly. You can have all the gismos you want, but that's not going to provide the proper mindset that will prevent an accident like what we've seen out there now. And so, what this does is, it really provides an additional training to get our police officers to a point where they can have an issue and they are in control, the idea is to maintain control. If you don't maintain control of yourself, you are not going to maintain control of that situation, and none of the bolo wrap and all these things, all great, but it does not provide that mindset that you need to handle that situation appropriately and not have these kinds of events that we are watching on TV, which leads to all kinds of issues and all kinds of problems. And so, Commissioner Fors, I appreciate very much, being a wrestler you understand these things and I appreciate very much your support and the Commission's support and the Mayor's support on these issues, the Fire Department take that to the floor that we've done for training and take ourselves to that next level so that we can comport ourselves in such a way that we are not on national TV.

Mayor Lago: Thank you Mr. Manager.

Vice Mayor Mena: That's good.

Mayor Lago: No, I think it's wonderful.

Vice Mayor Mena: I think it's a good idea. I want to commend Commissioner Fors for the idea and Chief Hudak. I had the same thought that you brought up, which was when we sort of approved the new building with the fifth floor and all the training apparatus that are eventually going to be in there. This was somewhat the same logic, right, to make sure that we have inhouse more training opportunities so that our police officers are more prepared, and we are being proactive about that. I think a lot of that was really some of it actually using guns, shooting range and different simulators, so this is kind of interesting thing to weave into that defensive tactics, non-lethal

confrontations, and so, I think it dovetails nicely with what you already have coming on the fifth floor there, and I think it's a very novel idea. It's somewhat kind of intuitive, I think, to some people you think about it, like you are not trying to encourage the use of force, you are trying to discourage the use of lethal force. It makes total sense that from a psychological perspective, right, if you are just more comfortable engaging on that level that you are going to be more willing to do it when the time arises.

Chief Hudak: There is, and you've heard me say this before, that there is a different mindset of people that we are hiring now that we hired 30 years ago, when I got hired, about resistance to engage and what they are seeing. To everyone's point and to the conversation you and I had, Vice Mayor, we are weaving this into the overall response to what we saw last year. So, we are currently working with the panel that we put together to review our policies. Dr. Albert and I have conversed about tweaking some of the things he wants to see about our policies. We are following up with the body cameras are now out in the RFP process, we are kind of looking at what we are going to do. So, we are moving forward with that as well. And then this additional training will all be woven into that and presented to you all, both individually but collectively as a package.

Vice Mayor Mena: This pace that we are being proactive. Thank God we haven't had the kind of incident that we've seen happen in other cities in the country that have gotten a lot of publicity, whether fair or unfair, whatever the situation was, we really haven't had that kind of incident of late or at all that I can remember. We've had some things happen, but not the type of incident that we've seen happen lately. And so, I think it's great that we are being proactive and really looking at being ahead of that, instead of reacting to it when it does happen. And so, I think this is great. It dovetails nicely with the panel that you formed last year and that we will be hearing from this year. So, I look forward to hearing that and then, yes, absolutely this makes total sense to incorporate into that.

Commissioner Fors: And if I could give one example, which I think really illustrates why this is really about de-escalation really. You'll see a video where a police officer doesn't have the necessary skills will find himself needing to bring a suspect from the feet to the ground, maybe that person is fighting with somebody else, who knows. You'll see sometimes you'll have a strong police officer who doesn't have the skills who pick up the suspect six feet in the air and body slam him, that's because that person doesn't have the skills. That's how you end up on the news, that's how you end up being accused of using excessive force. Somebody who does have the skills who has practiced it can take a person down without even leaving a scratch on that person, and that's what it's really about in my mind.

Mayor Lago: I just wanted to echo the Vice Mayor's sentiments in regard to Commissioner Fors. I think this is wonderful. I congratulate you for bringing this forward and working on this. I know you put a lot of effort into this, along with the Manager and our Police Chief. Again, its all about like you said, de-escalation and not being on the news, and being on the news for good things. And when you have to use force, being thoughtful and understanding that can use force in a way that, like Commissioner Fors just mentioned, you can leave somebody without even a scratch and achieve the goal of ascertaining a person, getting that person under control. So, I commend you for bringing this forward and I support this.

Chief Hudak: And our officers do listen. There is no way to put this...

Mayor Lago: Its just another tool, another tool.

Chief Hudak: When an officer has to use force its an ugly situation and it makes for TV. That being said, by law we are allowed to use force to effect an arrest. How we go about doing that and how we continue to train ourselves to do better is what we are here to do.

Mayor Lago: Like we've said a million and one times, and I'll reiterate it again, this Commission and this city supports its police and its firefighters.

Chief Hudak: I think the members of the departments know that.

Mayor Lago: And we stand with them and I know that they have to do an incredibly difficult job every single day, and who knows how things can turn in a split second, from nice beautiful day to an ugly day. So, this is just another tool in their toolbox to be able to, again, keep this community safe.

Chief Hudak: And one of the proudest things, to your point Mayor, that I have as the Chief is, when we have had people cross that line on physical force, the officers, they are the ones that won't tolerate it amongst their own. So, that duty to intervene, I'm not concerned about that, because I know who we have in this department and they won't tolerate it either. So, this is a welcome training. We are doing a survey right now throughout based on anticipation of how much kind of training we already have, and then we'll continue to embolden on that.

City Manager Iglesias: We all hope that that fifth floor, that training floor will make a great police department even better.

Mayor Lago: Hearing no further comments, may I have a motion on this item, Commissioner Fors.

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Commissioner Fors: So moved.

Commissioner Anderson: Second.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk would you call the roll.

Vice Mayor Mena: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Commissioner Anderson: Yes

Commissioner Fors: Yes

Mayor Lago: Yes