

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-2
February 11, 2025
Police and Fire Headquarters
2151 Salzedo Street, 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, Alberto Parjus
City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz
Jackson Rip Holmes

Agenda Item F-2 [1:34 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission directing the City Manager to develop an “Expedited Permit Review Services Program” for a maximum twelve-month trial period to allow for expedited review of certain permit applications for interior commercial and interior residential work and authorizing the City Manager to seek proposals from the City’s approved pool of consultants for plans review and building inspection services and to negotiate an agreement for such expedited services as appropriate. (Sponsored by Commissioner Castro)

Mayor Lago: Moving unto item F-2.

City Attorney Suarez: F-2 is a Resolution of the City Commission directing the City Manager to develop an “Expedited Permit Review Services Program” for a maximum twelve-month trial period to allow for expedited review of certain permit applications for interior commercial and interior residential work and authorizing the City Manager to seek proposals from the City’s approved pool of consultants for plans review and building inspection services and to negotiate an agreement for such expedited services as appropriate.

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Commissioner Castro: So, this one is my item too and I'm extremely excited to bring this up because it's been a long time and I want to go ahead and thank City Manager, Deputy Manager, Douglas, I know you've worked with me, I don't even know for how long. I think this started back when Peter was here and he wasn't very accepting of it, but I think he would love the idea now that its flourished. I want to also thank Diana, Paula, and everybody else that was involved. Let me go ahead and give a little more general details because this is still – Cristina was very involved as well, thank you. I want to give a little detail but very broad, because this is still being negotiated. Somebody has to be picked to help us partner with this program. The idea of this program is a five-day review per round of reviews. So, it would go through an expedited, I think its called EPRS, Expedited Permit Review Service, and you want to give a little more detail, broad details Doug. It's a pilot program too.

Acting Director Development Services: Doug Ramirez, Acting Director of Development Services. So, currently the city has consultants that we engage that help the Building Department to perform plan reviews. The idea here is that we would engage with them and create a trial program so that we can use their services to create an expedited, as the Commissioner said, five business day turnaround for specific permit types, namely interior commercial or interior residential permits. The reason we picked those is because they don't have zoning, and they have smaller scope of work which the consultants are more geared towards doing efficiently. We have also, we will limit it to non-historic properties so that it doesn't have a historic review. We have discussed it with Fire and since Fire will be involved in the commercial projects, we do think that this could be a good program for the city. It would help certain applicants, the ones that have these types of projects. They have the option to participate in this, get the expedited reviews, and at the same time would alleviate some of the load from Building Department and staff, so that we have more time to work on our other reviews and get those done faster.

Commissioner Castro: So, at the end of the day, it's a win-win. It's a win for the people that opt in and it's a win for the people that don't pay and don't opt in. I'm very excited. Thank you so much Doug. We will continue to give more details after this is approved and we negotiate, and we pick the service provider that's going to help us. Are there any questions, if not, I'll move it.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll second.

Mayor Lago: If I may. Mr. Ramirez quick question. Do you have any examples of other municipalities that are using similar expedited programs where people pay additional monies to have their permits expedited.

Acting Director Development Services: So, Miami-Dade County had a program for a while that they attempted it where you'd pay extra, and they couldn't figure out the logistics of it. They limited it only to building trade and that created an issue for them. I had a conversation with them

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to find out what could they do, and they were having issues with staffing. They never tried it the way we are trying it using the consultants. The City of Miami also has a program that they have used in the past. I don't know if, Commissioner, perhaps you could elaborate on what they have done there, because you are more involved in that realm.

Commissioner Castro: So, Miami-Dade County and I believe it was almost 15 years ago, they did have a program, I believe its called OPR, and the way that they did it was very, very different from how we are doing it. They were actually charging, they were actually adding a fee per review, and I think it was hourly as well, and it was a program that you had to get approved for as well. If there was space, sufficient space then they would be able to offer this expedited service. What we are offering is completely different. This is a white glove service that I guarantee you when it takes off, all the cities are going to piggyback off us. We are going to be the example of expedited permitting.

Mayor Lago: So, what is the cost? Like if I want to do this. Say, I'm doing an interior renovation and I have to pay my existing permit fees, because for example, if you have an exterior reviewer, prior provider, in most cities, the prior provider only does certain disciplines and then what ends up happening is that the city gives the client, the resident, the business owner a reimbursement, a percentage of their permit fee because most of this is being reviewed by the prior provider and not being reviewed by the city. So, in this case, let's just give you an example. Let's say its an interior remodeling, it's a million-dollar project, the person is going to pay \$15-\$20,000 in permit fees, they pay those fees and then they have to pay an additional fee to have it expedited, correct.

Commissioner Castro: Can I go ahead and answer that question.

Mayor Lago: If I may, I just want to ask Mr. Ramirez, the Director, because I want to understand it, because you have a private provider, you are a private provider who absorbs a certain portion of the scope and the city doesn't charge a percentage of the permit fee, so how is this going to work. I just want to understand it, because I don't have the knowledge of it.

Commissioner Castro: Doug, I'm going to recommend that you don't answer that question, because we are going to have to negotiate with other, the other partners and we shouldn't be putting numbers out there, percentages.

Mayor Lago: If I may. If I may, I'm voting on something now, I just want to know the numbers, the cost, so that when – I'm all for expediting, I think its great. I think its an opportunity. I love free markets. I think its great. If somebody wants to pay an additional fee, I don't have an issue with that. I just want to know what the costs are before I vote on something.

Commissioner Castro: It could be anywhere from 15 to 30 percent above what you regular pay for normal processing. We can't put a number out there right now because it would hinder our possibilities of negotiating.

Acting Director Development Services: Mr. Mayor, I could answer part of your question without going into that part. As far as the private provider projects, there has defined that you can give a discount when there is a private provider doing the plan reviews and inspections. And if its both, then you get more of a discount and if its only one you get less of a discount. I don't have those numbers in front of me, but they are in the same range of what Commissioner Castro was speaking.

City Attorney Suarez: But also, if I could add that this would certainly require an update to our fee schedule Mayor, and so that change once staff, the Manager's office negotiates with the providers or enters into an agreement, the fee schedule would have to come back to Commission.

Mayor Lago: I can't vote for anything unless I know the exact numbers that I'm voting for. I don't think it would hinder us. I do a lot of negotiations every single day as long as – its pretty standard, the numbers. You can explain it. I don't think it's a big deal on that front, but I understand that you don't want to give, I guess the fees that you are going to be charging because the providers maybe will charge more, I don't get it, but at the end of the day its pretty standard across the board, when you are looking at prior providers. There is an industry fee, some are a little higher, some are a little lower, but its not by much, it's a few percentage points, correct.

Acting Director Development Services: We are talking about 15 to 30 percent.

Mayor Lago: That's a big delta. You want to kind of like understand.

Commissioner Castro: Mayor, its going to come back to us for us to approve. Its not going to start without us approving a fee.

Mayor Lago: I understand but I'd just like – Again, I'm all in favor but I can't vote for anything that doesn't have fees attached, so I need to understand what the costs are. I just want to be as responsible as possible when I vote on something, that's it.

Commissioner Castro: Absolutely. I understand your concerns, but the truth of the matter is that we cannot have fees if we don't get this approved to be able to negotiate with providers. So, it's impossible to provide you with a fee. I hope I can have your support.

Commissioner Menendez: Will that be something that comes back to us?

Commissioner Castro: Absolutely.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Through the Mayor. I've got concerns too, because what this essentially says is that if you don't pay an extra you are not going to be getting faster service from the city. This increases the cost to residents then overall. I would like to have more of an in depth meeting with you before being able and analyze whether this is the best course of action for our residents, to cause a cost increase for them, as opposed to doing a better job within our Building Department in expediting permits from within, as opposed to doing outside providers reviewing the plans that are submitted. I'm all for expediting within our department, but I'm concerned about now causing an additional premium on residents who want to just do some simple renovations. Why should they have to pay a premium now, if they want to be treated in a more expedited process.

Commissioner Castro: I completely understand your concerns, but I can guarantee you that won't be a problem because with establishing this program, we are also alleviating the load on the Building Department, which at the end of the day, is going to make our service a lot faster without paying a fee.

Vice Mayor Anderson: I just don't have enough data.

Commissioner Castro: Yes, the pilot program is to collect the data. It's a pilot program. This is not permanent. After we collect data and we see how feasible and if there was satisfaction, which I'm pretty sure there will be, then we can go ahead and vote if this is something we want to continue doing permanently.

Vice Mayor Anderson: Again, I think there can be a lot more background, research, discussion, evaluation, feasibility study done on doing such a thing before we start tacking more costs onto the residents that want a simple interior renovation done.

Commissioner Castro: We're not imposing any cost. You can opt in, or you can opt out, and the whole idea of this pilot program, it is to collect data, to analyze, to see how we can better our service, that's the whole point of this. I completely agree with what you are saying, but nobody is imposing any extra fees. This is something you opt in for, if you want to use it, and if not, and I'm pretty sure that at the end of the day we are going to have a great product because, as I just said, its going to improve the wait times and the due dates on the reviews that don't opt in. It's a win-win.

Commissioner Menendez: Commissioner Castro just give my thoughts. I would say of late in just talking to residents, there are a lot of issues and a lot of concerns that residents are worried about, but the one common theme besides civility is permitting and a lot of residents have found themselves in sort of a bureaucratic nightmare of the permitting process and I think they've been reaching out to the city for a long time asking for solutions. So, if this pilot program leads to a solution to the satisfaction of our residents, I think this is what they want from us, to take action

and be bold enough not to kick the can down the road but address a matter that I think you are doing a great job of bringing to the community.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you.

Commissioner Fernandez: A lot of residents have found themselves forced to hire permit expeditors, because of the delays they have found. There has been a systematic failure in Development Services Department that led to a change in leadership in that department, and we need to find a path forward for our residents are able to find that the city has a process in place, where they don't have to wait, as a resident told me, 18 months to get an approval on a bathroom in their house, because that shouldn't ever take that long. So, this is a process that, its not going to require somebody to walk you into the Development Services Department as a favor. Now there is going to be a process in place where you want to pay extra for an expedited process, there will be an expedited process, but as the Director said, it will reduce the workload which will now provide for an opportunity for our staff to focus on the permits that could take a little bit longer, there may be more questions that need to be asked, and I know that the City Manager and I have already had conversations about other changes that are needed in that department that will help alleviate some of the issues. We've had issues with the technology. It was a bad system that was purchased. Unfortunately, we are stuck with it now, and we need to find a way to incorporate the human component back and allow for communication. I had a resident at office hours last week, he had an issue where he had filed for a permit for a driveway. It is his current driveway, same material, all he wanted to do was redo it on the same footprint, and he kept hitting roadblocks since August of last year, and it was literally as simple as somebody realizing, well, we just had one thing that we couldn't verify, but nobody took the time to pick up a phone, call the individual and say, is this what the problem is. So, Commissioner Castro, I commend you on getting this process. I know it has been a long road to get here.

Commissioner Castro: Very long.

Commissioner Fernandez: But we are here to deliver for residents, not continue to kick the can down the road. This will deliver. It's a pilot program. If it doesn't work, it can be changed, it can be scraped, but this will provide an opportunity and trust me, I have been told by numerous residents, I wish there was an expedited program, I'd be willing to pay more to get it done.

Commissioner Castro: I think us that are in the industry, including the Mayor would agree that time is money, and that people are more than willing to pay an extra fee to get a permit a lot faster.

Mayor Lago: If I may, just before I vote on this. If I may just one second. Thank you. First off, our employees do a wonderful job.

Commissioner Castro: They do.

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Mayor Lago: They do an amazing job. We are not kicking the can down the curb. They do an amazing job. They are out there every single day battling in front of the residents, in front of the business community. They are trying to do their best. Over the last, probably two or three years, there's been massive change in the Development Services Department, from building a \$5 million-dollar-plus building, to going paperless, millions and millions and millions of sheets of paper were digitized, and we went paperless, to also digitizing the way that we do now our plans review. Where you can review multiple disciplines at once. This is what I do for a living every single day, so I have a little bit of experience in this. Our city is in very good shape in regard to Development Services. No one's kicking the can down the curb. So, at the end of the day, I'm not a believer in this type of service, because I need facts, I need numbers. I need to understand what things cost before I can take a vote on it and what I would rather focus in on, and this is why our democracy is so great, we can vote on things and if it gets approved it gets approved, if not, we move on. I would rather focus in on, if there are areas where we have shortcomings, let's focus in on those areas that have shortcomings. Let's hire more staff, let's train staff, let's extend work hours, let's figure out how we can incentivize staff to meet certain goals, but I don't think that we should have two different tiers where it hasn't worked in other cities, like you said before, I just don't think its an opportunity for the city to say, everything now can be expedited because you pay an additional 30 percent and you get your permit expedited. I'm a no vote on this. I commend you for bringing this legislation, but I think we need to be very careful when we say we are kicking the can down the curb, because at the end of the day, a large majority of our community, which is not going to pay for the expedited services is still going to have to deal with our amazing employees. So, we are not kicking down any curb. Moving forward. Madam Vice Mayor, you take over if you like, but I'm pretty well kind of informed on the issue. I deal with municipalities all over Miami-Dade County, all over the State of Florida, every single day, and I think that we can always get better, never stay stagnant, but the idea is not through an expedited service. Its through refinement; refinement of our own positions, employees, protocols. There's a lot of things that we can do. Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: The type of input I've received from residents is, yes, there's issues in the permitting department, but that has to be dealt with in the permitting department, not willing to pay an extra fee, nor should they have to pay an extra fee for first class service from our city. If we need additional employees in there, then let's raise that issue, let's deal with that issue head-on. They pay a significant amount of money for those permit fees, and we should be delivering based upon what is already paid and not have to charge a premium to an outside provider to be able to deliver a simple interior renovation. This should not be what our city is requiring of folks to be able to get something done on a timely basis. As far as the driveway, usually that's a communication problem. I've done my driveway, okay. I did it before we had even more improvements in our department here. The communication is key. When you have a change in your permitting process throughout the place and you have new notes, then send an email to the

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residents, send an email to the contractor, not just to the contractor, and then the resident has no idea what's going on – 99 percent of what I deal with is lack of communication from the permitting department to the resident and then the contractor gives a different story as to the reason for the delay and blames the city for the delay when in fact it was the contractor who didn't respond on a timely basis to the city for that little piece of information that's missing. So, communication problem. If we have a deficiency within the department let's take care of that and move forward.

Mayor Lago: You have a motion.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. What a shame that we couldn't have all of us agree with this. I'm pretty sure this is going to be extremely successful, and satisfaction is going to be five maximum.

Commissioner Menendez: Commissioner Castro, if I may. Just put it into perspective so that people listening and watching, put it in a form that everybody can relate to. Everybody, at least most everybody goes to Disney World with their family. Tickets have been going up, up and up, the rides are the same, but Disney unveiled years ago a thing called "Fast Pass," I think its called "Genie" now. Its almost impossible to get – the demand to get the "Fast Pass" is through the roof, they can't even absorb the demand. So, Disney understands that standing in line to get on Space Mountain or Pirates of the Caribbean, people are willing to pay a little bit more if they can get to the front or near the front of the line. So, we are not inventing the wheel, we are not reinventing it, it's been around, we are just applying it from the private sector, private sector idea into the public sector, which a lot of people have always wanted. They want government that has that private sector mentality, and I think this pilot program is a step in that direction.

Commissioner Castro: And the reason that I'm using a service provider is because I never want a resident to go ahead and pay a fee and get ahead of other residents in the same Building Department. I want to go ahead and separate those two, so that both sides can benefit.

Mayor Lago: So, we have a motion.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir, Mr. Mayor. I have a member of the public requesting to speak on the item, Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Mrs. Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz, 1447 Miller Road. Some of us live in a fantasy world, everything is wonderful in Development Services. People go in, in three minutes they get taken care of, that's what we were told. Guess what, its not true. It doesn't happen. All you have to do is knock on a few doors and you will hear the first complaint is, permits, permits, permits, even when they get an expediter, unless the expediter can come in the back door, like some do, it doesn't help. And our residents, some of our residents are very clever, because they can go to an elected official that can take them up to the building to talk to the people in charge and they get expedited without having to pay extra, but that is not good for everybody. We've been talking and running around in

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circles. I understood the process. If people want to get their permits done faster, they will go in this program. Its up to them to do it or not to do it. Maybe they don't have to get a private expediter to do it for them, they will save money. If they do that, our employees will have a smaller load, and they will be able to help the ones that chose not to use this program faster. What a concept. If some are going this way, there are fewer on that side. That's very hard to understand, very hard to understand. This is very long overdue. I know that we have Development Services Director and Manager that thought they had invented the solution with the program that goes down every other day, every three days, twice a week, still because number one, it was not installed correctly; number two, it doesn't work. Now it works in other cities, but it doesn't work here, because maybe the training was not done right. Oh no, the people in charge would have done it right. That's why we have to keep paying for people to go train again, and again, and again. People listen, elections have consequences. There are three people sitting here that know what the people want. Forget about the circle, forget about imposing people. Nobody has to pay extra. If I wanted to get my driver's license and go to the agency, I would have paid less than when I did it because you know what, I did it from my house, it was mailed to me, I didn't have to go to the agency. That is giving convenience. The doctors that have special services that come to your house, they charge you a little more. I do not understand how we are concerned about people that may think they have to pay. They have to pay now adays. They have to get a private expediter to help them, because our department is not doing it fast enough. And let me tell you, some of you may have heard what, 18 months, I've heard two and-a-half years for doing things that were so simple that if you didn't need a permit, you could do it maybe in three days. Okay. Enough is enough. Let's stop. I'm sorry. I have to laugh, because I do not understand how anyone can talk about, we cannot do this, but the same person takes people to Development Services to get special red carpet service, and some special expediters can come in the back door and get it done faster than the poor person that goes in, takes a number, sits down, or in three minutes they go upstairs – okay, we'll call you, that's the three minutes. No. Enough is enough. This is a program long overdue. I assure you its going to be very successful.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Clerk.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mr. Holmes: Thank you. I don't like to speak too much in any given day, but I can't resist here because I think the status quo, as far as I can tell is that developers get special access to permitting and the residents can wait all year or two or three years. So, we need to try to change this. Melissa Castro is a permitter. This is her expertise. Her mother had this business, now she has this business. This is her long suit and its only a pilot program. It is an improvement.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you.

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

Mayor Lago: Alright. So, we have a motion and a second, correct.

City Clerk Urquia: Yes sir.

Commissioner Fernandez: Yes

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Vice Mayor Anderson: For the reasons stated, no.

Commissioner Castro: Yes. Yes. And quick question, didn't you vote for annexation without knowing the fiscal impact or implications?

Mayor Lago: No. The fiscal impact was included in the slides that were shown.

City Clerk Urquia: Mayor Lago.

Mayor Lago: No. Thank you very much.

(Vote: 3-2)