

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-7
May 21, 2024
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 Manager, Amos Rojas, Jr.
City Attorney, Cristina Suárez
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Police Chief, Ed Hudak
Police Major, Jesse Medina
Human Resources Director, Raquel Elejabarrieta

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz
Jackson Holmes

Agenda Item F-7 [5:26 p.m.]
Update on police vacancies.
(Sponsored by Commissioner Castro)

Mayor Lago: All right, we'll move on to Item F-7, update on police vacancies. Chief, good afternoon. And we thought today was going to be an early day.

Police Chief Hudak: Good evening. Technically, it's evening.

Commissioner Castro: It is.

Mayor Lago: It's evening, it's after 5.

Police Chief Hudak: It's evening, good evening.

Mayor Lago: How's the weather?

Police Chief Hudak: It's a pleasure. The Cat-2 left -- passed. The Fire Chief's here in case we're going to have to open up the EOC. This is going to be an update on the police vacancies requested by Commissioner Castro. Major Medina's in charge of the Professional Standards Division and runs the background unit from the police side. And Sergeant Mager's also with us for your (INAUDIBLE). So, with that, we're open for questions if you have anything particular that you have to ask.

Commissioner Castro: Yeah, sure. Vacancies are still 37?

Police Major Medina: Yes, ma'am.

Commissioner Castro: And we had one departure and one --?

Police Major Medina: One hire.

Commissioner Castro: One hire?

Police Major Medina: Since the last one.

Commissioner Castro: How did that hire come about? Like, did we -- like what plan do we have in action? Are we going --? How are we recruiting?

Police Chief Hudak: How are we recruiting?

Commissioner Castro: Well, how did we recruit that one?

Police Major Medina: So, just last week, we went to FA -- FNU, I think it is. It's a university in -- sorry -- university in Hialeah. So, we target or we assist HR with targeting colleges, either presenting a table outside somewhere in the hallway, or we try to actually reach the criminal justice majors in the -- in the actual classrooms. And we have another one next month coming up.

Commissioner Castro: How is that going? How is that going?

Police Major Medina: As far as applicants from those events, I don't have those numbers. That would be more on the HR side if we've hired anyone from those.

Human Resources Director Elejabarrieta: Good evening, Commissioner, Mayor. Yeah, so we have an active recruiting process. We go to colleges, fairs, criminal justice fairs, FIU, Miami-Dade County. Applications are not a problem. Just this calendar year, we have received close to 400 applications. And then what we do is on a monthly basis, we invite those who have applied to have monthly orientation meetings in which the Chief and the police recruitment staff also attends to obtain their supplemental packages and then they move on to the oral boards.

Commissioner Castro: I know last time we had spoke about that some were in backgrounds or in training, I'm not sure what was it, but from those people that were in that process, is that process done? How many are still there or --?

Police Major Medina: So, currently we have eight officer or applicants in the background. So, each investigation kind of dictates its own -- it's its own animal. Some investigations are quicker, some slower, some have a lot of background that these background investigators really have to go in. They do a really good job. They go very in depth. So, they kind of take some time. Other speed bumps, no pun intended, it's you're looking at those, they got to pass a physical agility test, and sometimes they don't, so they get a second chance. So, that kind of slows the process in that sense. Right now we have like five who are scheduled -- they're scheduled to take additional physical agility tests, but we're just waiting. We had one today that actually passed. So, we did good there. He's in the process. He's passed his polygraph, passed the psychological. We're moving along with him. Hopefully, we get him and another body in the next academy. But crossing -- crossing our fingers.

Commissioner Castro: So, the last step is the academy?

Police Major Medina: Yes, yeah.

Commissioner Castro: So, that means he's already passed background?

Police Major Medina: Well...

Human Resources Director Elejabarrieta: So, once they go to the academy, they have passed background, and they're officially hired. They're City employees, and we sponsor them, and they go to the academy. And like the Major said, we have eight in backgrounds and we have four scheduled for interviews this week that hopefully at least two will also (INAUDIBLE)...

Police Major Medina: Oral boards -- oral boards are tomorrow. We have four. And June 13th is the next orientation.

Commissioner Castro: How many laterals do we have now?

Police Chief Hudak: In total or how many we (INAUDIBLE)?

Commissioner Castro: Well, how many are we using now? How many are we using now?

Police Chief Hudak: Are we losing?

Commissioner Castro: Using. How many are active right now?

Unidentified Speaker: Laterals.

Police Chief Hudak: Laterals throughout the department. I -- I'd have to get back to you. I mean, between FHP over the course of the (INAUDIBLE), we haven't recruited the laterals yet because we're pending -- everything is pending the ratification vote of the contract and the approval by this body. So, we can't offer what we wanted to do. We have been -- talked to them actively. Chief Hanlon has talked to a few of his ex-colleagues that are willing to start up, but we can't offer anything until that's done. So, that's really kind of holding everything else up. Our advertising campaign is on hold as well, because right now, once the contract is, again, ratified by the union, approved by this body, then our numbers are going to change, and that's where our pushout would be from there. We continue to, I mean, struggle like everybody else does. I mean, as of right now, there's a bill on the President of the United States' desk, and it's the Bipartisan Recruit and Retain Act, specifically for police officers throughout the country. And it's a COPS grant that we will apply for as well, just to help. Cleared the Senate in 2023 to expand community-oriented policing services to help support the efforts of recruiting law enforcement. So, it's a national issue. I mean, I think I'm comfortable in the fact that, you know, we're on track, but if you go through LinkedIn, if you look at any social media, everybody, every department is doing the exact same thing. We know 30 left BSO and they're recruiting just as much. So, you know, this is the ongoing norm, if you will, for police officers at this juncture. Once the -- again, once the contract's done, then things are going to start. Because you know, we've already gotten to the point recently, and we're going to go to impact bargaining on it, is that we've had to go to mandatory overtime. So, you know, contrary to what the residents have been told by anybody, our staffing numbers are still the same. Our first big staffing challenge is going to be the 4th of July only because that takes the entire department. And having -- I mean, we're not going to be short-staffed by any stretch of the imagination, but the officers are working. I mean, the ones that are here are working and they have to. And we've put out the new summer bid, which we're going to continue to do. We -- I've had meetings -- or had meetings with the president of the union on labor management issues that we're talking about. And myself and the HR director have been available throughout just to see what it is that we can do. I think the final proposal will hopefully be coming, I think, Thursday?

Unidentified Speaker: Thursday.

Police Chief Hudak: Thursday. So, we'll have an answer from the union on Thursday, and I'm sure we'll -- we'll be sitting hopefully here to ratify that with you all. And then we're -- then it's on, because then we have our advertising kind of targeting that we have done before. I can't say enough about our Communications Department putting out the videos, you know, like we've said before. Our recruiting video was recognized as one of the best in the country. And I think now we're starting to hear from other parts of the country that people want to come down here. The only thing that's holding us up to really get running out of the gate is once we know what we can offer starting up and those nuances, if you will, in the contract. But yeah, the officers are getting tired. I understand that. We're all pulling double duty, everybody. But we're still continuing the training officers. We're still -- we're still keeping up with all of our standards. Major Medina, Sergeant Mager, goes every day, if not every week, to find wherever we can. I mean, it is literally like a college recruiting. She'll go to the PAT test, which is the physical ability, and if we see somebody, we're going to go. We're sending people to academies. This morning, Deputy Chief Hanlon was at the brand-new Miami-Dade Community College facility, which is spectacular. Today was the first open house. We're sending people there. We're sending people to Miami. So, we're ready to go. We're ready to go. And I think by next month, hopefully, all things being equal, if the Commissioner, if you want to report on this again, hopefully we'll see more numbers coming in. The laterals will be a little bit faster. I know we have one or two in the pipeline. The only other lateral we have maybe a University of Miami officer that's close by. We've got some of our communications operators, but you know, I mean, like anything else in this job, we have two people on restricted duty within the department for investigative disciplinary issues. So, it's a constant moving. You know, so -- but I think we're in front of it.

City Manager Rojas: Mayor, if I may. One of the difficulties of recruitment and hiring, at least from my perspective, is that you can get people to apply, but then when they go through the process, the -- and correct if I'm wrong -- a lot of the folks get washed out in the psychological. They get washed out in the polygraph, and not so much in the physical because we do give them an opportunity to come back. Then the delay of hiring, as the Major had said, has to do with the background. Some people have a very in-depth background, lived in five or six different states. I'm not sure if you all use the rule of three when you do your contacts, where they put three references and you ask those three references for three more, and then you ask for three more to get to a person that kind of knows you but isn't connected to you. So, it's a rule of three, at least in the federal government, that's what we use, a rule of three. So, getting the people in the door, I'm not sure, I think we're getting those people in the door. The process just washes some people out and at the end, you'll have, if you go through the entire process -- and the Chief and I sat down the first couple of weeks I was here and reviewed our requirements. I wanted to make sure that our requirements were equal to or better than most of the departments around us here or some -- and we have good standards and good requirements for applicants. So, I think the Chief is absolutely correct. It's just the nature of the beast at the times that we're living in that we're having the difficulty to making sure people make it through the entire process. And pretty much we hold their hands all the way through the process. So -- but that's my perspective.

Mayor Lago: So, there's nothing new to the recipe. The recipe continues to be the same. I'm going to give you two examples, okay? The City of Coral Gables has the highest standards. In the last three months, I brought two individuals to the attention of the Chief. I don't want to mention their names. One of them is working through the process in an effort to, hopefully, in the next two years, potentially meet the requirements to be a police officer. They have the heart, they have the interest, and their only goal is to be a City of Coral Gables police officer, a very impressive individual and has the drive to hopefully be part of this great team. Another individual has all the credentials, amazing on paper. I don't want to -- I want to be very careful what I say, but the person met every single thing that this city would ever want. We have the highest standards -- I don't know if it's changed -- of any police department in Miami-Dade County. This person did not meet the psychological requirement. And everything else about this person is exceptional. I was not aware that this was -- and they don't understand why. Your team was incredible to give them an opportunity to sit down, explain everything. But when you look at them on paper, and you look at them in regards to their education, their involvement in regards to philanthropy, their engagement, they've never had a ticket, they've never had a criminal incident. They're a perfect, stellar individual. But they didn't meet that requirement for one reason or another. And obviously, like always, the Chief will not share with -- any of that information with me and will not share anything with anyone else. But to make a long story short, I thought this person was a shoo-in, a shoo-in to be a police officer here. And that person was not -- did not meet that certain criteria. So, it's a tough -- it's tough to see a candidate that you're like, this could be a 30-year police officer in the City of Coral Gables, and you know, college degree, great background, great family, but...

Police Chief Hudak: I think...

Mayor Lago: It didn't come to fruition.

Police Chief Hudak: To your point, Mayor, I think we've always had the standards. I mean, we were the first city to require college credits to become an officer back in, I'm going to date myself here, 1991. And everybody else has caught up to what the requirements are. But as you have heard me say, the Coral Gables police officer is a different type of police officer than everybody else. And we are looking for that type of officer that's going to interact not only safely with the bad guys but protect everybody else. And it's not for everybody. And I understand that. And some people leave for a lot of different reasons. But at the end of the day, you know, I think we have a damn good group of recruits. And I do believe that I would put my life in any one of their hands. And if it doesn't, or if they don't meet that, it's my responsibility or the Chief's responsibility to change that. We have made exceptions that I can live with, but we have never changed our requirements. And with an exception comes an additional test. So, we are constantly -- you can ask them, they are constantly in front of me and constantly with Raquel to talk about what we're doing. So, this -- we took a lull when we hit zero because we were at zero vacancies and the attorney general actually lauded us for being at zero vacancies. And then everybody decided that, you know, at that three-year marker they were going to go. So, we're in the mix, but

I think we're going to be okay, only because of the hard work of the officers that were here right now. That's the reality of it is.

Commissioner Castro: So, there's two restricted, really there's 39 vacancies.

Police Chief Hudak: I'm sorry?

Commissioner Castro: So, you said there was two restricted.

Police Chief Hudak: No, no. Well, those -- so, again, if somebody has a disciplinary issue, it wasn't necessarily a police officer. There's com operators, there's anybody that falls under my scope. If there is an internal investigation, certain internal investigations will require them being on restricted duty, which doesn't mean they hurt our bottom line or they're suspended, you know, pending or relieved of duty pending the investigation. Again, I -- we handle all the serious investigations and employee conduct, things like that. So, those decisions are made, but we're doing it in the sense that it doesn't hurt the body count. Somebody is still able to do a job. We have maternity leave. We have injured officers. So, we use those to the best of our ability to staff those positions, whether it be the desk or whatnot. So, you know, it's an ongoing from day to day. I've -- Internal Affairs has texted me twice since I've been sitting here, so I'll see what comes when I get back to the office.

Commissioner Castro: Would you say the academy is six to eight months?

Police Chief Hudak: The one in Miami-Dade is a little bit shorter.

Police Major Medina: About six months.

Police Chief Hudak: About six, and then mine, about seven or eight. And then we have about six weeks of orientation, and then three months on the road with an FTO, and then the fourth one is actually by themselves. So, their probation starts after. So, they're a probationary employee through the academy. Something that your police department does is, which is a recruiting benefit, is they get paid as a police officer the moment they go into the academy. Now, there's certain things that we can do, some reimbursables, which people have paid us. And another department that's a lot smaller than us figures if they pay us the \$12,000 before the person even takes the oath, they're going to get that person back for whatever reason. And a lot of those officers have talked to me and come through of why they moved on. And again, for right now, as I said previously, my decision is not to bring people back that think the grass is greener come in, but I'm always willing to pivot and I will leave that up to the officers. So, we are going to start a panel that we'll talk to people that have left to see if they want to come back when the contract's done. And if that's a recommendation, they can make it to me. But again, until it gets to the Chief of Police, you don't know what the Internal Affairs case has. Raquel doesn't know what the IA case is. It's

myself and Internal Affairs and maybe the Assistant Chief. So, you have to look at the totality of the individual, both that we're bringing back and how we're disciplining.

Commissioner Castro: I'm just trying to think of a timeline of when we would see that these vacancies would start filling up, right? So, I'm here trying to make it make sense in numbers. So, if the academy is this long...

Police Chief Hudak: Well, I can't give you a definitive number on the academy. Listen, in August, we have three coming out or two coming out in August, two coming out in August. They'll be on their own within nine months from that, pretty much.

Commissioner Castro: So, like we're looking at like 2025, maybe.

Police Chief Hudak: Pretty much in that, now, now the...

Commissioner Castro: That's if we don't get more -- even more vacancies.

Police Chief Hudak: True. And listen, I think we're going to have some vacancies. I've talked to officers that are either moving their families -- so I know there's more vacancies coming. I know right now there's more vacancies coming because they've told me. And unless they tell me everything else, I don't know. But the laterals is a six to eight week turnaround. And that's somebody who has done the job depending on where it is. And again, it all depends on the contract, depending on where we start them, depending on what they know, depending on what resources they have, we can cut that down in a process. I mean, we have probably a dozen or slightly less than a dozen people that work for FHP. And you know, FHP is in the middle of a contract negotiation with their troopers. Traffic homicide, we've been -- we've talked about traffic homicides. Looking with somebody that has traffic homicide school, which is an 800-hour school, I think once we have an idea of what our lateral recruiting's looking like, and then I think the collective effort of getting people, the younger ones, that timeline will get narrower is my estimation right now.

Commissioner Castro: So, I was thinking like a monthly update for vacancies, but I don't even think -- I think we'll have like the same number of practically with...

Police Chief Hudak: I don't think it's going to change much. If you want, we can send to the Commission through the Manager, I get a weekly report. But if you want, we can consul -- we can -- if you want, with the crime stat reports that you get, month -- that goes weekly, but every month we will add that monthly report that we have. That way it's public record, it's out there. If anything else changes through the Chair -- through the Manager, I will definitely advise you as we go on. And I will also communicate with you all when we change up the -- or when we put out our next recruiting video with Communications.

Mayor Lago: Thank you, Chief.

Police Chief Hudak: Did you want to talk about -- since we're all here for the exit interview question, because it's kind of the same.

Commissioner Castro: It's the next -- is it the next one?

Mayor Lago: We can talk...

Commissioner Castro: It's actually the one (INAUDIBLE).

Mayor Lago: We can talk about the exit interview.

Commissioner Fernandez: F-9.

Commissioner Castro: F-9.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Lago: Well, we have -- obviously, we need to, before we move on to F-9, we have public comment. Yes, sir.

Commissioner Castro: Thank you for taking the time (INAUDIBLE).

City Clerk Urquia: First speaker is Maria -- Mrs. Maria Cruz.

Maria Cruz: Mrs. Maria Cruz. I just have a question from the Chief. As soon as you can -- and actually, not a question, a statement. As soon as you can, we need some help by Gables High. It's getting -- every morning, I thank God that I didn't hit somebody. They go through...

Police Chief Hudak: Traffic?

Ms. Cruz: On Le Jeune, yes. On Le Jeune, they cross the street, they cross Bird in between the cars and the buses, and all of a sudden, you see somebody in front of you.

Police Chief Hudak: Students.

Ms. Cruz: Bad, bad. And on Le Jeune, from Bird going towards Merrick Park, let me tell you, there is not -- the problem is not the kids. The problem is that, you know, you can make a right turn from Bird to Le Jeune. You can't do it when the kids are walking. They start honking their horn. And then if you don't move, they try to cut around. I mean, I'm surprised that nobody has gotten hit there.

Police Chief Hudak: We will...

Ms. Cruz: Please, we need...

Police Chief Hudak: We started a partnership with the school and we will follow up on that, especially...

Ms. Cruz: They have a security guard there.

Police Chief Hudak: I know.

Ms. Cruz: He's been doing -- listen, they wait across the street till he pushes the darn thing.

Police Chief Hudak: Right.

Ms. Cruz: That has been working, but the drivers.

Police Chief Hudak: Yeah, we'll use the youth resource officers and some of our traffic guys...

Ms. Cruz: Please.

Police Chief Hudak: And we'll get them in there. Yes, ma'am.

City Clerk Urquia: Jackson Holmes.

Mayor Lago: Good afternoon, sir. Good evening, excuse me.

Jackson Holmes: Thank you very much. About a year ago, we had a confrontational meeting over this issue, and it had an, for me, an uncertain outcome where there was a disagreement between the union president, Chris Challenger, who was saying that we had a very serious problem of people leaving. And the Chief was downplaying that and suggesting that Chris Challenger himself was encouraging people to leave as a, I suppose, some kind of bargaining ploy. Then, what, two months ago now, was it? The -- there was another confrontation, let's say, only this time, we knew who was right and who was wrong, who was telling the truth and who lied to you on that very day. And I'm sorry to say he keeps expressing his frustration that I'm calling him a liar. You are a liar. And it's proven on the tape from that Commission meeting. He lied to you...

Mayor Lago: Sir.

Mr. Holmes: And to the public about...

Mayor Lago: Sir.

Mr. Holmes: Let me finish, let me finish.

Mayor Lago: If I may.

Mr. Holmes: The -- what he said was that the -- the fellow who went to Coral Springs had just moved to Broward and took the job because he needed to be near his new home in Broward. That was not true. He said that the -- that was the reason that the officer left. Whereas Mr. Challenger contradicted that by saying that the officer has always lived, more or less, for years and years and years in Broward County. And that he told Chris Challenger in the exit interview that he wanted to stay in Coral Gables and it was a matter of pay. I submit to you that what you should do is put in the next E-News a one-question survey, if you will, however you want to put it. Ask the people who are reading and who are residents of Coral Gables, say the union says that they need a minimum raise of whatever it is, X number of dollars. Would you support giving this to them, you know, as a way of stopping the outflow of officers? Would you support giving that raise to them, even though it means reducing City expenditures elsewhere? I'm asking you to do that, and I think what you're going to find, I predict, is that there will be an overwhelming approval of that. And then we should do it. His plan does not work. He's part of the problem. The low morale has been recorded by the police union. Eighty percent disapproval of his leadership as chief. We need to replace him because that's one of the reasons that we're losing officers. And we need to raise the pay more than has been proposed. Thank you.

City Manager Rojas: My turn? Mayor? Thank you, Mr. Holmes. I think you may have your facts a little bit skewed, but honestly, I really don't appreciate the fact that you calling out the Chief of Police and basically calling him a liar in public like this. I think you just need to do your research and get your facts straight before you start lobbying allegations. But thank you, Chief.

Mayor Lago: Chief.

Police Chief Hudak: Sir.

Mayor Lago: I'll make it very simple. I apologize on behalf of the Commission for what you just had to go through. I attempted my best to try to bring some control to these meetings. I don't have control of these meetings, okay. At the end of the day, nobody should have to be disrespected like that. And I apologize on behalf of the Commission, on behalf of the City. Thank you, sir.

Police Chief Hudak: I appreciate it. Listen, part of the job...

Mayor Lago: You don't have to appreciate it.

Police Chief Hudak: No, no, but I do. I appreciate the support, maybe not of the 80 percent of the department, but everybody else. But listen, it's part -- it's part of my job. Disciplining anybody is not necessarily a fun part of it. And if I get asked by this body to investigate the death of a dog because of alien invention, I'm going to do that anyway, no matter who the person is.

Mayor Lago: I know. I know how it is. Mr. Clerk, what else do we have?

City Clerk Urquia: That's it, sir.

Mayor Lago: All right. Thank you very much.