

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-10
July 25, 2022
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Vince Lago

Vice Mayor Michael Mena

Commissioner Rhonda Anderson

Commissioner Jorge Fors

Commissioner Kirk Menendez

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias

City Clerk, Billy Urquia

City Attorney, Miriam Ramos

Assistant City Attorney, Naomi Levi-Garcia

Greenspace Management, Deena Bell-Llewellyn

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-10 [11:48 a.m.]

An Ordinance of the City Commission amending the City of Coral Gables Zoning Code, Article 6 "Landscape," Section 6-104 "Landscape Requirements for Public Rights-of-Way: to amend planting height and various other provisions, providing for a repealer provision, severability clause, codification, and providing for an effective date. (Sponsored by Commissioner Anderson)

Mayor Lago: So, we're doing F-10.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Good morning, Mayor and Commissioners. This is an ordinance sponsored by Commissioner Anderson. The city has certain zoning code provisions which address planting height of trees in the city's public rights-of-way. In order to incentivize diversity in the urban canopy, this ordinance would give the Greenspace Management Division greater discretion to allow trees of different heights. In addition, it lowers the percentage of palms able to be planted in the rights-of-way from a max of 25 percent down to 10 percent. That's all it does.

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Mayor Lago: I think it's a great idea. Further comments.

Vice Mayor Mena: You said something about the heights of the trees.

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: Right. So, this gives Public Works, basically greater discretion to all trees of different heights, lower heights potentially, if they meet all other requirements in the zoning code and contribute to the diversity of the urban tree canopy.

City Manager Iglesias: We are also meeting all the safety requirements as far as height is concerned, can't be 7 feet over sidewalks and also any sight distances will be met. So, all the life safety criteria would have to be met also.

Vice Mayor Mena: Would it be introducing then, I guess, new types and varieties of trees into the right-of-way?

Assistant City Attorney Levi-Garcia: I believe the intent is to allow for greater diversity some flowering trees that maybe you can't procure at the 25-foot height that's currently required at the time of planting, so they are healthy and they meet all of the requirements in the zoning code, you could put some lower, some trees of a lower height, as long as they contribute to diversity. So basically, it's just giving Public Works some discretion on the height of trees at initial planting within the public rights-of-way.

Vice Mayor Mena: Just want to make sure that in addition to aesthetically that they are resilient varieties of trees that deal with hurricanes and storms and obviously, with oak trees they are obviously eventually grow into very strong and large trees and they present their own issues, but they are generally resilient trees. So flowering trees, I am not an expert on this like you are, Deena, so I'll let you address, but you understand my point. I want to make sure that in addition that we abide by, obviously, safety and visibility and all those types of things, that also that we are not costing the city additional dollars by putting trees that won't survive those types of storms and hurricanes and things, and then we are in a process where we are losing our investment effectively.

Commissioner Anderson: Let me just go over the language with you a little bit too. This is very limited in scope. Some of these trees, I call them filler trees sometimes, because you have a gap that's too small for an oak, too small for a large shade tree, and you want to put a pop of color in or you want to use a variety that doesn't have, like you have the green buttonwood here this morning that is better suited for a streetscape that has a narrow median. So, the language here is limited to trees whose average mature height is 25 feet or less, okay, so you are talking about smaller varieties to begin with that we need in some of these areas that large trees just won't work. With that said, you can explain further.

Ms. Bell: I'll elaborate. What we are running into, we have what, 41 percent tree canopy coverage in Coral Gables. We have a lot of large trees and a lot of native trees that are going to grow very large and now we need to do the proper urban forestry thing of coming in with under-story trees, below the larger trees or the greater variety of natives, greater variety of flowering trees, most of

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which are not available in nurseries in really large sizes in any quantity. So, if we allow more flexibility to say, 8 to 10 feet tall trees, of course we will review it, we'll make sure they are 7 feet clearance over the pedestrian walkways and make sure they are not in the triangle of visibilities impeding visibility and we'll review them on a case-by-case basis.

Vice Mayor Mena: Okay. I don't know if you addressed my concern about the resiliency of the types of trees.

Ms. Bell: Absolutely.

Vice Mayor Mena: In other words, are these the types of trees that will withstand typically speaking, I know any tree can be impacted by a significant storm, but over the course of time certain variety of trees are more resilient than others, that's one question; and then, I'll have you go ahead and address my second question which is, from a maintenance perspective, we get a lot of feedback from residents that they'd like to see greater amount of maintenance on our swale trees. We are usually on a three-year rotation, I think, last I heard. So having more trees, obviously is going to require more maintenance and therefore more dollars. So, I just want to make sure that we've thought through all of that and what the gameplan is for that.

Ms. Bell: Absolutely. What I see this doing is increasing diversity of more native tree species. Sometimes its hard for us to find a diversity in native tree species in nurseries. Sometimes there's a lot of smaller containerized trees that we could use that will eventually grow to 20 and 30 feet tall that might not be available. So, we are going to have a very resilient urban forest by building this, and we are going to avoid the monoculture of having all live oaks and mahoganies, basically.

Commissioner Anderson: The Camp Hatchie Project has taught me a lot about our native trees and most of them are built to withstand the storms and the winds and by having filler trees fill the gaps between trees, and in a forest trees kind of help protect each other too, so that if you don't have room for that wind to really get in there and keep tearing at the tree from all four sides, and its also necessary for maintenance of wildlife. So, you need more diversity and in the long run, one species of trees gets attacked by a particular beagle or something that really takes it down, our canopy won't suffer so much.

Vice Mayor Mena: And how are we going to address the maintenance, in other words, the cost associated with this will lead to more trees, because I'm being told these are gaps where the currently permitted types of trees such as oaks simply won't work, and so, these will, and I understand that and that's nice aesthetically, that's going to mean more trees, that's going to mean more maintenance. How are we paying for that?

Ms. Bell: It necessarily won't be more trees. As we remove trees because of disease or lightning strikes, we all have flexibility to come in with different species of trees, not necessarily over-planting. We'll never over plant the public right-of-way. We have to leave the appropriate spacing for the trees. So, I don't see that affecting the cost or maintenance.

Vice Mayor Mena: So, there will not be any additional cost associated with this, in your opinion.
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Ms. Bell: No. We'll have the ability to put some smaller trees, whereas before we needed to find and locate a very large tree that might not be available in the nurseries.

Commissioner Anderson: You might avoid some problems in maintenance issues, like you see right now, the V-cuts underneath powerlines, we can choose a species that will grow below, nicely grow below as opposed having V-cuts on the trees.

Commissioner Menendez: I think there was a beautiful flowering tree near the Venetian Pool, forgot the type, but every time I'm out in the community and you see these beautiful trees blossoming, the beautification, the added layer of beauty to our city is amazing and you hear the residents talk about it, because like you said, its so different to what we are used to. So, I'm a big believer in what you're proposing. You have my total trust. I know your passion and your expertise, the same with Commissioner Anderson, anybody who introduces me to the world of air potatoes I have to really trust on this matter. So, I think it's a great idea.

Mayor Lago: So, with that being said.

Commissioner Anderson: I'll move it.

Commissioner Menendez: I'll second.

Commissioner Anderson: No public comment, right.

Mayor Lago: I'm excite. Listen, more trees.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, we have a member of the public requesting to speak on this item.

Mayor Lago: Of course.

City Clerk Urquia: Its Ms. Maria Cruz.

Commissioner Anderson: Welcome back.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cruz, tell us how you are feeling. Ms. Cruz, tell us you are out of the hospital, please.

Ms. Cruz: I'm out of the hospital, my brain was found and I'm here to support this item, as long as we don't do anything that will keep us from getting those skinny, nothing palms will have my support. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Yes. Perfect. Okay.

Commissioner Menendez: Yes

Commissioner Anderson: Yes

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Commissioner Fors: Yes
Vice Mayor Mena: Yes
Mayor Lago: Yes
(Vote: 5-0)