

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-2
April 28, 2015
City Commission Chambers
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Jim Cason
Commissioner Pat Keon
Commissioner Vince Lago
Vice Mayor Frank Quesada
Commissioner Jeannett Slesnick

City Staff

City Manager, Cathy Swanson-Rivenbark
City Attorney, Craig E. Leen
City Clerk, Walter J. Foeman
Deputy City Clerk, Billy Urquia

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item F-2 [12:28:38 p.m.]

Update on Controlled Choice process with Miami-Dade Public Schools
Commissioner Keon

Mayor Cason: We'll move to F-2. This is a very nice update on controlled choice. Commissioner Keon.

Commissioner Keon: I was going to ask the Manager for the record and for anybody that's watching to know exactly where we are with controlled choice. This was a very big issue for me when I ran for office and once elected was to address and deal with this issue on school choice, and asked my colleagues here on the dais to work with me on this and allow us to move forward and to meet on our behalf and come back and give them information. And I am exceedingly grateful to all of you for our working together as a group to deal with this issue, and I think that we have been successful, but I'm very grateful to each of you for all of the help and all of the cooperation and all of the good ideas, and all that came forward to get to where we are today, because it really is all of you together here that moved this forward. Thank you.

Vice Mayor Quesada: Commissioner we should be thanking you...

Mayor Cason: Thank you for your leadership.

Vice Mayor Quesada:...because this really was a battle before any of us were on this dais. This is an issue that no one's ever wanted to take up and address and you went at it head on; and our school system is better today because of it, because of the changes and your leadership on this item, and it's only going to improve with these changes, so thank you.

Commissioner Keon: You are welcome, but you know what?- nobody does it alone.

Commissioner Slesnick: Commissioner Keon you might just explain briefly for those watching for the first time what this controlled choice...

Commissioner Keon: I'm going to ask Cathy to just give us a quick update so we know where we are from the last meeting to the School Board.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: Thank you Commissioner. I'm going to bounce it over to the City Attorney. He is ready for this item and he's going to give the update.

Commissioner Keon: OK.

City Attorney Leen: Thank you Madam City Manager. I am very pleased to report to you on behalf of the City Manager and myself and obviously the Commission, who we were representing at the School Board meeting that the First Reading of the Controlled Choice Item went exceptionally well for the City. We were able to obtain our principal goal of ending Controlled Choice, at least on First Reading. There is still one more reading, but there was significant support from the superintendent and the School Board for that, but they also revised the proposal to address the issues that we had raised as a Commission, that you had raised as a Commission, that we had raised as staff. Those conditions include grandfathering, which was essential component of the City's position, and they adopted that position, the School Board. In addition, a preference for siblings, it's similar to other policy related to siblings in the School District, but they did specifically recognize the importance of siblings. Also, in terms of grandfathering – originally the School Board was looking at grandfathering involving Kindergarten, really above Kindergarten and they went to Pre-K, which I know that the City Manager really pressed and I thought it was great that we were able to obtain that. The School Board was very receptive to the City. As you all know, the City Manager put together a letter that was sent to the School Board about Carver, and about the surrounding public schools; and there were a number of points in the letter, and she had spoken to each of you individually about

it, and it really was a position of the City indicating a commitment to the public school system in Coral Gables, and I thought it was extremely well received. And the City Manager, if I may say this, she spoke extremely well at the meeting, she represented our City very well, and we got very positive feedback from both the superintendent, our Board Member Raquel Regalado, also our other Board member Dr. Perez, who is also is appreciative, and then the rest of the School Board. It was one of the best meetings we went to. We did sit there all day; we were there literally for, I think it was eight hours.

Vice Mayor Quesada: I'd rather sit there all day and the result comes out for us.

City Attorney Leen: I agree and I was proud to be there and I know the City Manager was too. We sat there all day, we were recognized a number of times, they really appreciated what the City did here, and it's really a credit to you, to all of you, for raising this issue. Thank you Commissioner, thank you Mr. Mayor, thank you Commissioners. I don't know if everyone knows this, I know you all know this, but just for the public, there was a lot of hours put into this matter over the past six to eight months – meetings by Commissioners, by the Mayor, by staff...

Commissioner Keon: By residents.

City Attorney Leen: I'd like to, if its OK Madam Manager, I'd like to recognize two of your staff members, Carmen Olazabal and Naomi Levi, who really spearheaded the effort. I'm really proud to be a part of this. I have to tell you, it was one of the best moments being here seeing that meeting. So thank you very much for your leadership.

Mayor Cason: And also there may be some potentially good movement on West Lab.

City Manager Swanson-Rivenbark: First, before we get into the West Lab discussion, which is a discussion that we want to brief you on, and then come forward and seek a recommendation or direction on. The other change regarding Controlled Choice was the School Board was limited because there was a rule that would have required Sunset to only have a geographic preference for the Sunset Magnet around the Sunset area, and so while they lifted Controlled Choice on First Reading, they've also allowed us to continue the benefit of a larger area for Sunset Magnet for geographic preference. Today 34 percent of our Coral Gables residents attend in the new language, 25 percent preference will be for Sunset in the immediate neighborhood, and another 25 percent will be for what is called, District B and District A, and so a larger area will have a geographic preference for Sunset which doesn't exist today, and that is a very strong win for the residents and their children. As it relates to West Lab, it is a discussion that is beginning, the School Board has allowed their staff to sit down and speak with the University of Miami, the City of Coral Gables, and potentially Baptist on how we can work together to create a very

viable partnership that could result in the expansion of the school. That's going to be a series of meetings will have to take place for us to come together in order to bring forward specific recommendations to you all, but those meetings are going to begin.

City Attorney Leen: If I could add something. I'm sorry actually I meant to say that too. I got so excited talking about all these wonderful things. One other thing just for our residents - practically what it means is they no longer have to participate in the lottery, and yet they preserve their ability to get into the Sunset Magnet, wherever they live in the old Controlled Choice District. From a legal perspective it was a significant achievement because when we were at the meeting - we went to a couple of meetings, Cathy and I, the City Manager and I, and that at the first meeting they had said they could not amend the Board Rule. Basically, it was in front of the Diversity Committee; they said, Oh, there is this Board Rule, it limits the ability to get our residents into Magnet and have the preference be wider, and I know that the Commissioners really wanted that, and there were a number of correspondences that went from individual Commissioners to residents, to the School Board, from staff and it was really a wonderful moment because the superintendent recommended essentially a change to that Board Rule in order to accomplish this task. And we were there when the superintendent spoke and he said that he wouldn't allow a rule to get in the way of doing the right thing. So what you did in speaking about this and raising it in the community and with the School Board worked. It convinced the Superintendent that this was the right thing, so it really was a significant day for Coral Gables.

Vice Mayor Quesada: Just two final points from me on this topic, two things. Even though she wasn't a Commissioner at the time, Commissioner Slesnick was very involved in this process as well. She attended a lot of different meetings, which we saw her at, so she was very involved as well, even though she wasn't a Commissioner at the time. Number two is, can we give - it's important for us to maintain a good relationship with the School Board...

Commissioner Keon: Absolutely.

Vice Mayor Quesada:...can we do something, I guess this request is for you Mr. Mayor, can we give a proclamation to the staff members that have helped us along the way?- even the ones that we had a little push-back at the beginning just to maintain a positive relationship with them moving forward. After the Second Reading, once it's all done, can we do a Proclamation?- something nice for them just to say thank you and remind them that when they deal with us we can end on a positive?

Commissioner Keon: For everyone who is listening, the issue with the repeal of the School Choice, or the removal of the School Choice now allows every resident in the City of Coral Gables within their geographic location that they live in, there is a school that is your school, so

when you move into a neighborhood, you will know the school that your child will be assigned to, if you chose to use the public school system. You can also still apply to transfer your child to other schools, you will know what the school that your child will be assigned to when you move into a neighborhood, and the City has made a real promise to ensure that every one of our public schools is good as every other one. So we will have high performing, quality public education in our community, so we are very happy; and I think also we do really need to extend our gratitude to the School System, to their employees, and particularly to Superintendent Alberto Carvalho for doing what is right for children. When it was brought to their attention and the issues we discussed with them, they have truly been just great people to work with to achieve these good things for our children.

Mayor Cason: When is the final vote going to be?

City Attorney Leen: The final vote, I had pulled it up, it's going to be in early June. It's June 17th, pardon me, mid-June, June 17th at 11 a.m., Second Reading. Also, I do think I should also say, I know that the Board member, Regalado, was very involved in this particular solution and when she came here and spoke to you, she took that back and I know that she wanted me to tell you that.

Mayor Cason: I'm happy to do something after that second vote as well as, perhaps a letter to Carvalho with thanks for their cooperation and helping make this long term inequity and stigma removed.

City Attorney Leen: Dr. Perez as well. She came to a couple of the meetings personally, in front of the School Board, so they've both put a lot of personal attention to it.

Commissioner Keon: The School Board and their staff were really great.

Commissioner Slesnick: Commissioner Keon, thank you very much for clarifying that what the Controlled Choice was, and thank you Vice Mayor Quesada for spearheading that, it really was a divisive issue in the community and I think most people are really satisfied now with the decision of the School Board.

Commissioner Keon: So the final decision will come in June, but we have every reason to believe that it will work out well, so thank you, and also to our staff for all their work, it's a very good thing for our City. Thank you.

Vice Mayor Quesada: So to the residents who really spearheaded this and there are a few residents that we saw every single meeting, that were very, very involved.

Commissioner Keon: You know what I think what's really important and I know just from the two years that I've been here as a Commissioner. One, the residents in Deering Bay had been trying for a long time to resolve some issues with the County and when we as a City came to help our residents on an issue that really was important to our City, because it affects our property values, it affects how the community is structured and a lot of things. It was when we got involved as a City, and particularly through the City Attorney's office, we were able to resolve that issue and this is just another issue where we as the representatives of the people in our City, when we get involved we can be very – we can make things better. So I hope that when there are when people believe to be great inequities or injustices, I really hope they come forward and talk to us about them, because that's also a big part of what we have to do.

Mayor Cason: Great.

[End: 12:42:22 p.m.]