

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item I-3
Commission Chambers
November 10, 2020
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli
Vice Mayor Vince Lago
Commissioner Jorge Fors, Jr.
Commissioner Pat Keon
Commissioner Michael Mena

City Staff

City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Attorney, Miriam Ramos
City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Deputy City Attorney, Cristina Suarez
Assistant City Attorney, Naomi Levi Garcia

Public Speaker(s)

Agenda Item I-3 [12:46 p.m.]

A Resolution of the City Commission supporting the renaming of South Dixie Highway/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, from the Miami-Dade/Monroe County line to State Road 9A/Interstate 95 Northbound to “Harriet Tubman Highway” / U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, including that portion of the roadway that lies within the city limits of Coral Gables, from SW 57th Avenue to Booker Street.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I-3.

Deputy City Attorney Suarez: I-3 is A Resolution of the City Commission supporting the renaming of South Dixie Highway/U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, from the Miami-Dade/Monroe County line to State Road 9A/Interstate 95 Northbound to “Harriet Tubman Highway” / U.S. Route 1/State Road 5, including that portion of the roadway that lies within the city limits of Coral Gables, from SW 57th Avenue to Booker Street.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yes ma’am.

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ACA Levi Garcia: Hi, good afternoon Mayor and Commissioners. As the Deputy City Attorney mentioned, this is a resolution supporting the renaming of South Dixie Highway to Harriet Tubman Highway, including the portion that lies within the City of Coral Gables.

Commissioner Keon: Where does that come from, I mean who initiated this.

ACA Levi Garcia: Miami-Dade County passed a resolution renaming their portions of Old Dixie Highway and West Dixie Highway back in February.

Vice Mayor Lago: And Naomi quick question. First off, thank you for being here. I know that all of us probably got e-mails from certain individuals that are very involved in historic preservation who wanted us to, potentially put together some sort of committee to discuss this, and to really understand the implications and to see what could be done or if there were other options.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I'm sorry, but the historic preservation activists are against the renaming...

Vice Mayor Lago: I know. Again, I'm just putting it on the record, and we can vote on it, not a problem. I don't have a problem with – I don't have an issue with this vote at all. Just saying, I want to be clear, there are residents, they have concerns, they are advocating, they are constantly advocating in regards to historic preservation, and I just found it interesting that they were concerned, not concerned, but that they wanted to have public input in regards to our resolution as a city advocating to the county. I found that interesting. I don't know if any of my other colleagues got those e-mails.

Commissioner Mena: I had the same question as Commissioner Keon, which is, I don't really understand why this is our decision, its not our road, its not our decision to make. I can get into more of what I think about it substantively, but it seems like, I don't understand why we have to...

ACA Levi Garcia: Its not our decision exactly.

Commissioner Mena: They are asking for our input.

ACA Levi Garcia: It is a state-controlled road, and a renaming to actually take place the Florida Legislature would have to take some action to effectuate that renaming. But FDOT will not erect any signs unless the municipalities involved, meaning the municipalities where the road lies pass resolutions in support of the renaming. So, even if the Florida Legislature acted, no signs would go up unless the city was in agreement and that agreement is made evident through a resolution.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Let me say something. I respect the historic preservation people, activists, not our committee, but activists in the community. I live in a historic house so I'm very much for historic preservation and the historic house I had designated, as opposed to some of the activists who have not designated their home, but I am for this resolution renaming Dixie Highway as Harriet Tubman Highway. Nobody is going to call it Harriet Tubman Highway, everybody is going to call it US-1 and continue calling it US-1, but I think it be an embarrassment for Coral Gables to

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be the only city in Miami-Dade County that votes against the renaming of Dixie Highway and I support this resolution very thoroughly, very heartily, and I urge you not to vote against the resolution.

Commissioner Mena: So just to be clear. My issue with it has absolutely nothing to do with historic preservation. I just think its PC culture run amok. It's been South Dixie Highway, it always has been South Dixie Highway, and there is a lot of peer pressure when everybody starts doing it and I think everybody would agree that, yes sure, I'd rather be named Harriet Tubman Highway than South Dixie Highway.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: US-1.

Commissioner Mena: I got bad news for you all. You keep going down this slope and you are going to be having tough conversations about George Merrick, you may not want to have about the statue outside, about buildings that we have named after him, and its all part and parcel of this PC, sort of thing, where like all of a sudden we want to change names and take down statutes. I'll be honest with you, its not my thing, but more importantly, this is not our road. When we want to do something relating to these roads, we are not allowed to because we have no province over them, but when they will have a tough decision to make they want to sort of pass the buck to us and look for cover. That's how I feel about it. I just don't understand why this is our decision. This is not our road.

ACA Levi Garcia: So, just for clarification purposes. The standard that requires municipal participation for code designation is outlined in Florida Statute, its not necessarily specific to this particular request. Its something that exists outside of this request.

Commissioner Mena: But here's the thing. I took a very quick look at that; I'll be honest with you. I didn't do a deep dive on it, but this is not a situation where you are looking to name a road for the first time. That statute, if I saw it correctly, is about honorary designation of roads or something like that.

Deputy City Attorney Suarez: So, Commissioner Mena, I'll read you the section. Its Florida Statute Section 334.071 subsection 3, and it says, erection of markers shall be contingent on the appropriate city or County Commission passing a resolution in support of the particular honorary designation. If the bridge or road is being designated is located in more than one city or county, resolutions supporting the designation must be passed by each affected local government prior to the erection of the markers. So that was what Ms. Levi Garcia was referring to that FDOT won't erect markers unless each municipality has supported it in a resolution.

Commissioner Fors: So, they've already renamed it.

ACA Levi Garcia: So, what the county has done is renamed the portions of Dixie Highway that are under their control, which is Old Dixie Highway and West Dixie Highway. The portion that is under state control, they've directed their lobbying team to add it to their legislative agenda, to
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basically lobby for the state to take action to officially rename the road. From my understanding from FDOT, if they receive all of the participatory resolutions from municipalities this year, they'll move forward with placing an honorary designation sign. They will not replace any existing signage. They'll put one sign up that says, honorarily designated Harriet Tubman Highway. If the Legislature takes action, then the potential switching of signs will begin. But there is a feasibility report involved, because you have to look at the cost and the scope of the work and it's not something that happens overnight.

Commissioner Mena: Then again, this has very little to do with – if the people want to have an honest conversation, we can have it. Its not about Harriet Tubman. Pick any street or building or place you'd like; I'd be happy to name it after Harriet Tubman. She is a wonderful part of our history who deserves to be honored in every way. This is not about Harriet Tubman; this is about the name Dixie Highway and trying to basically rewrite history. Its not really my approach to things. For the record, Dixie Highway, Dixie comes from the Mason-Dixon line and everything south of the Mason-Dixon line was called Dixie. Did horrible and atrocious things happen during that era of American history that we all agree were horrible, yes.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Commissioner Mena...

Commissioner Mena: But this street is called Dixie Highway, it always has been.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Commissioner Mena, I have news for you. The University of Miami asked me to name somebody to a committee because there are 3,000 petitions, students and professors and such to take the name of Merrick away from the buildings.

Commissioner Mena: Of course.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: And I named somebody who shares my feelings that is an absurdity and that that is ridiculous, and I am 100 percent opposed to it.

Commissioner Mena: So where are you drawing the line, because this seems to be a very similar issue.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I know. I agree. Maybe you don't like the color coral and you should rename the city Pink Gables or something.

Vice Mayor Lago: So that's what I was trying to do a little bit of just get maybe a different perspective and see, maybe some of the individuals who are very involved in historic preservation here in the city their opinion. Its fine. You can name ten people, whoever you'd like Mayor, I don't care, it could be whoever you like. I just wanted to take a moment of reflection of pause before we voted on this, because if we start, Commissioner said on Dixie Highway, we are going to end up with removing Cortez Street, and we are going to be going down the rabbit hole which will basically end up...

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Commissioner Mena: Change Columbus while we are at it.

Vice Mayor Lago: Columbus, Cortez, Pizarro, they'll come here for the statute in the front. I think we need to be very careful; we need to be very careful.

Commissioner Mena: Especially when – we are not the ones looking to do this, we're not. We didn't start this discussion, we didn't vote for it, the county did.

Commissioner Keon: I would support taking away the name South Dixie Highway and it should be named US-1 and that's what it should remain, and it should be US-1. There shouldn't be any issue related to it. I think its more than just being politically correct. I think we are at a time in history in our country where we are prepared, hopefully to have open and honest discussions about racism and ethnic bias and religious bias and all of the things that have gone with them.

Vice Mayor Lago: I agree.

Commissioner Keon: I don't think that's really political correctness. I think that's a coming of age of a country that realizes and recognizes that our history is not always something that we really can today say that we are proud of. You look back and you look at the whole black lives music and everything else. I don't want to allow that discussion to get into all of that. So...

Commissioner Mena: That's what this is about, I'm sorry. I'm with you, but...

Commissioner Keon: You know what, it makes no difference to me. Well, I do believe if South Dixie Highway is viewed as being terribly offensive to a community of people that we live with, I have no problem with changing it.

Commissioner Mena: Except we have no reason to...

Commissioner Keon: I don't even want to be involved in it.

Commissioner Mena: I don't either. We don't have any reason to believe or know that. What tends to happen, frankly, is that in universities and the Mayor already made reference, a bunch of people who are not the people, frankly, who were subject to the acts and behavior in question are offended on behalf of the people whom were actually wronged and that's what I mean by political correctness run amok, in my opinion. Look, this is my view. My view would be to take no action on this. We don't have to do anything.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: With the university you probably have the proponents of change is that those buildings are not named after George Merrick. They are named after his father who was Presbyterian Preacher, and he was very much for equal rights, equal whatever.

Vice Mayor Lago: So, they are coming for everybody.

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Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Okay. What is the pleasure of the Commission?

Commissioner Fors: One quick question for Ms. Levi Garcia. Did we look into and we may not have, but did we look into whether other cities, municipalities, counties have any established criteria for reconsidering renaming of landmarks or roads or anything like that.

ACA Levi Garcia: So as you can imagine, several municipalities were implicated by the county's February resolution, ranging from Homestead all the way north to the City of Miami, so in urging municipalities to take action, all of those cities were implicated. I did a quick search and I couldn't find that they had passed their resolutions yet, but I can request from FDOT whether they have passed similar resolutions and provide that to the Commission just as a bell weather to see what other cities are doing in response to this request from the county, if that's something that you are interested in.

Commissioner Fors: My main concern is doing it piecemeal one by one, if something comes up, somebody says something then we decide to change the name to that, next time we don't. I wish we had some kind of framework or rule to which we can approach and examine requests for name changes, if that's even possible. Vice Mayor Lago speaks of appointed committee, that could be part of it. I think at the end of the day, it's just another group of people that's not us, just he said, she said their personal opinions about it. That's what's my concern is that I wish there was a standard.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: What's the pleasure of the Commission?

Vice Mayor Lago: Listen, if we are not going to do anything and one of the points I was going to mention, if we are not going to do anything its perfectly fine with me. We are not going to take any action, its fine. One of the reasons why I mentioned about potentially having a committee discuss it, we can appoint some of our neighbors from the MacFarlane, from Golden Gate to provide us with some guidance. I'm not going to put myself into somebody else's shoes and I hope somebody else won't put themselves into mine, but at the end of the day, I have to agree with Commissioner Mena's comments about, I think we could have a situation here with PC run amok. We need to be very careful, and if we are going to do something like this, and Commissioner Fors also brings up a very good point, this is being cut up into pieces. I want to find out what other cities are finally doing. Are they moving in this direction? Do they have maybe the same sentiments that we do?

Commissioner Mena: Probably not.

Vice Mayor Lago: Again, we are in discussion. I don't see an urgency to make this decision today.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Will you make a motion to defer?

Commissioner Mena: I'll make the motion to defer.

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Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Second?

Commissioner Keon: I'll second it.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Alright. All those in favor say aye.

All: Aye.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Opposed – likewise. Deferred.