

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item F-9
May 7, 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

Public Speaker(s)

Maria Cruz

Jackson Holmes

Agenda Item F-9 [4:21 p.m.]

Discussion regarding the involvement of the inspector general to discuss the state of the City (Sponsored by Mayor Lago)

Mayor Lago: Alright, moving on to F-9. Madam City Attorney, so I put this on the agenda after having extensive conversations with our City Attorney to talk about an Inspector General. So, I', going to be bringing the next Commission meeting an ordinance asking for the installation of an Inspector General. The two options that we have are Option A, we go at it alone and we have our own Inspector General which is here in the City along with a staff member or maybe they don't need a staff member but potentially they will. Or the City Attorney was working on speaking with a Miami-Dade County Inspector General, which I prefer for two reasons. Number one, it's

City Commission Meeting

May 7, 2024

Agenda Item F-9 - Discussion regarding the involvement of the inspector general to discuss the state of the City.

independent. It's not an individual who is in one form or another associated with anybody. And number two, we wouldn't have to pay potentially the tail, which would be the pension, the insurances. We would just have to obviously pay the fees associated with having the Inspector General. And it's not a precedent. It's something that's happened in the past. I know you were working on finding out what were the possibilities of doing this.

City Attorney Suárez: So, Mayor, the Manager and I met with the County Inspector General and had a very preliminary conversation. So, currently, they do not have that model with any other city.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

City Attorney Suárez: They do have -- they do provide IG services to the School Board. And that started off as something that was temporary and it's been much longer than temporary now. The -- there -- like I said, we had very preliminary conversations. More than just the City providing, having to basically fund whatever staff would be necessary to service the City, I think there's capacity, general capacity issues that he, you know, he obviously could not give us an answer on the spot. There's a lot that he would need to flesh out on his end if it's the will of the Commission for us to continue to explore that.

Mayor Lago: It's my will. It's my will. I think -- and it's critically important. I think that we need to -- we need to, in one form or another, either it be with the City or either it be with Miami-Dade County. I'm going to push for it. I'm bringing it to the next Commission meeting. And I want it -- I want it addressed as quickly as possible. And I would appreciate it if -- I'm more than willing to schedule a meeting with the Inspector General, myself, or the County. But I'm -- but I'd like to have you and the Manager present to make sure that we move the agenda forward, whether it be, again, hiring somebody for the City or bringing in Miami-Dade County to do the same thing they do with Miami-Dade County Public Schools. I would like to have it ironed out by the next Commission meeting so that I can bring that legislation forward.

City Attorney Suárez: So, Mayor, we can certainly reach out again and try to get -- continue to explore that up that possibility but I don't know that we'll have an answer from the County by next Commission meeting.

Mayor Lago: But you will have an answer of yea or nay, some sort of answer.

City Attorney Suárez: Right, it might be -- if it's now they might not be able to tell us (INAUDIBLE).

Mayor Lago: But they may say we need another three months, you know, four months. But I want to -- I'm going to put this on the agenda every single time until...

City Attorney Suárez: Understood.

Mayor Lago: It gets addressed in one form or another. I think this is critically important. I think this is -- this is going to be the most important piece of legislation I'm going to pass in the next year outside of anything that deals with, you know, public safety. I think this is -- this is probably the most fundamental most important thing that we can do as a city and I think it's critical we get it done. Madam Vice Mayor?

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, I think the County should also be urged to do that, not only for our city, but other cities, because, you know, the cornerstone of being able to have transparency and trust in our government is to be able to know that there's someone independent out there that is going to be examining things when there's an issue. So, having someone from the County look at this as opposed to having someone in here that is, you know, working with the rest of the employees, et cetera, I just think that's a much better course of action and I would support having an independent one.

Mayor Lago: Okay.

Commissioner Fernandez: I had had some preliminary conversations with the Manager about this early on in his term, about the possibility of creating this office in the City. So, I'm definitely on board on getting something done on this. I think you're absolutely right. It's something that other municipalities have. I believe Miami Beach is the -- currently has an Office of Inspector General and maybe we can model it off of what they've done. But you're right, I think this is something that is necessary.

Mayor Lago: Again, I say it's necessary and it needs to be done because for too long in this city, the word corruption has been thrown around and pinned people against the wall to get things accomplished, which in my opinion, way too out of line that word is thrown out here in the City. And it only started happening this year. So when we get the Inspector General here, I want to start immediately with the Commission, starting with the Mayor's Office. It's the first thing we need to get done. Because I have a lot, a lot that I personally want to share with the Inspector General. I think it's critically important that we have that individual here moving the ball forward to ensure that we stamp out any corruption, any malfeasance that exists here in the City. So, Madam City Attorney, I ask you to please, you know, make sure this is on the agenda and repeat agenda and repeat agenda until it's addressed here in the City.

City Attorney Suárez: Understood. And the Manager...

Commissioner Menendez: I believe the Manager wanted to...

City Manager Rojas: If I may add to what the City Attorney said, it's not only a matter of capacity for the Inspector General, that he would have to obtain a Board of County Commission approval

to go beyond his scope of what he's responsible for. That's number one for the Inspector General. Like I said, we've spoken to him. The cost, initial cost right off the bat to do our own Inspector General's Office is about \$550,000 just to start it. Then the question comes of reporting, who he's responsible to, and a list of things to keep that Inspector General independent of politics or issues. So, there's a lot of things to be worked through. I'm not saying it's impossible, it's clearly possible. We do have the Miami Beach model that we can look at and we have looked at it, but as you said, if the will of the Commission is to approach the Inspector General again and speak to him, we can do that. And in the meantime, we'll start developing an internal process of an internal Inspector General.

Mayor Lago: Mr. Manager, I'm pretty sure that if this Commission writes a letter to the County Commission asking for an Inspector General, we'll have a unanimous support 13-0 from the City and from the County Mayor. In regards to the \$550,000, I think that's the best investment the City could make. There is no better investment than that in my opinion because when you talk about a cesspool of corruption, you got to stamp that out because at the end of the day, it affects your bond rating, it results in, you know, decisions being made that, again, are cutting your nose in spite of your face. So, we have to be very, very thorough on how things get done just like the P-Cards. We talked about corruption and we talked about malfeasance in the P-Cards and look at the end result in regards to the P-Card. So, we have to be very thoughtful and very methodical. So, I wanted to make sure that everybody's on board and we bring it back at the next Commission meeting.

Commissioner Fernandez: We don't have an end result to the P-Card invest -- audit.

Mayor Lago: We do, but we're not...

Commissioner Fernandez: The audit is still not even halfway through.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, if it were...

Mayor Lago: Listen -- wait, wait, but hold on.

Commissioner Fernandez: Not even halfway through.

Mayor Lago: Again, I'm going to address you very quickly because you brought that up. Our Finance Director stood here and very clearly said that the preliminary review found no discrepancies. It was very clear, very clear, it's in the public record here. It's in the public record. It's irrefutable, irrefutable, so let's move on to the next item because we have a lot of things to do here today.

Commissioner Fernandez: What she said was actually that...

Mayor Lago: Vice Mayor.

Commissioner Fernandez: There was no -- nothing was done that was not under what was allowed. The question is should it have ever been allowed and that's why the Manager stepped in and changed the process and the protocols because...

Mayor Lago: I'm still waiting for...

Commissioner Fernandez: Things were being done that should probably not have been done.

Mayor Lago: Excuse me.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So...

Mayor Lago: Nothing was done that should not have been done. That's number one.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So...

Mayor Lago: Number two, I'm still waiting for the Manager to give me a memo. He still hasn't given it to me, and I asked for it. Again, other managers were held accountable for this. I've requested it already. It was not brought to me in this Commission meeting, and that was an example of what was allowed before and what's allowed now. So, we're already on our second Commission meeting that has not been provided to this Commission. And you know that's true because that was said in this Commission meeting. I said I would like that information, and it was not provided to me. So, I know that I don't have a majority of the votes here, but if I make a request, I should be able to get that request from staff.

Commissioner Fernandez: You should.

Mayor Lago: That's very clear. And that was not provided to me, because you're the first one to hold every manager accountable for not being provided documentation. So, we are now in a second meeting where I was not provided the memo that I requested. It was very simple and I will repeat it. I would like the information. What was done under the previous City Manager's tenure and what are the changes made to the protocols in regards to the P-Cards? Madam Vice Mayor.

Vice Mayor Anderson: So, you know, very concerned about employee morale, especially when allegations of theft and cesspool of corruption are levied. You know, you got to have the evidence first, not make the allegation and then try to, you know, document things later on. I have not seen any cesspool of corruption type of evidence and being that I'm not the only one that's been here for a period of three years right now and nothing has been stated thus far. Let's be cautious on how we treat our employees. If you're worried about employee morale, if you're worried about

protecting the employees and bringing protections on whistleblower actions and so forth, let's not be the cause of the problem.

Commissioner Castro: I'm more concerned about elected officials than actual employees but...

Mayor Lago: I know, trust me, we all are. We're all very worried about elected officials.

Vice Mayor Anderson: We are.

Mayor Lago: Yeah.

Commissioner Menendez: Is this all related to the water tower yet?

Mayor Lago: No, not yet. We haven't gotten there yet. That's my item also. But since you brought that up, I mean, I'm looking for the findings in regards to the COE that's forthcoming in regards to your case this week. So, we'll be dealing with that.

Commissioner Castro: Wait, the one you keep on sabotaging and hiring different attorneys?

Mayor Lago: Again, so...

Commissioner Castro: That one?

Mayor Lago: Moving -- so -- I wish that was the case.

Commissioner Castro: That one? Yeah.

Mayor Lago: So, moving on to Item F-10.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Mayor, before you move on, I have a request from members of the public...

Mayor Lago: Of course.

City Clerk Urquia: Who would want to speak.

Mayor Lago: Bring it forward.

City Clerk Urquia: First speaker is Maria Cruz.

Mayor Lago: Ms. Cruz, good afternoon.

Maria Cruz: Like I said before, it is Mrs. Cruz. I'll been Mrs. Cruz for the rest of my life. The fact that my husband died doesn't make me -- does not make me Ms. Cruz. Never have been Ms. Cruz, have been Mrs. Cruz for 55 plus years and will be Mrs. Cruz for as long as I live. I think this is a very important issue that we're discussing today. I think that I'm sorry to see the different explanations heard, because I sit here every Commission meeting, and I'm sorry, but the P-Card audit has not been completed. Only a few months were done. And I'm sorry to say, because today I've been trying very hard to not engage some of this stuff. But since it was brought up, and since I was the one that looked at the P-Card and I was the one that brought up the stuff that was obviously to the resident's eye not appropriate to have been bought with taxpayers' money, I have no choice but to bring it up. When we talk about Inspector General, we don't talk necessarily about buying stuff that perhaps we shouldn't buy. That's something that you would find in an audit. I think we're talking about what has been disguised or discussed today about a cesspool of corruption. Corruption goes beyond employees. Corruption goes to elected officials, higher-ups. We're not talking about the secretary that perhaps bought some ice cream for a party. We're talking about other stuff that all you need to do is take national newspapers and you see that there's representatives, senators, all kinds of people getting indicted for doing things that they shouldn't be doing. Okay, that's what in my mind what corruption means, and I looked it up in the dictionary. We're not talking about what I brought up. What I brought up was stuff that was authorized, signed off by directors that had no sense being bought for an office, because for somebody to tell me that they needed a soup pot, a six-quart soup pot to warm food when they have a microwave to warm food, that was ridiculous. So, I'm going to let it go at that. I think that an inspector general is a wonderful idea. I think that what was said by the City Manager is very important. It has to be an inspector general that's independent, not reporting to the people that may influence or may think that they can influence the inspector general, okay? This city deserves to have an independent, completely independent inspector general that we can go home and be satisfied that whatever that person brings about is not -- has not been influenced by powers that be, by the media, by anybody else. That is a true reflection of what's going on. And I think I'm being objective. I don't think I'm accusing anybody, but I read the newspaper every day. And I mean, beginning with New Jersey and other states, there's a lot of corruption being brought up. And as much as I think we're better than everybody else, it doesn't preclude the fact that it could be, okay? And that's why we need to be able to do it. And once again, when people mention COE, they need to be careful because when investigations are going on, sometimes they don't end up the way we want them to end. Sometimes there are surprises and investigations do not go the way we expect. So, let the process take place and then we'll discuss COE, okay? Thank you.

City Clerk Urquia: Mr. Jackson Holmes.

Mayor Lago: So, before, Mr. Jackson Holmes, in reference to your comments, you can play back the record. It's very clear. I said I would prefer an independent inspector general, again, with no ties to either the City or to anyone in this Commission. But as always, in the words of Mark Twain, you know, never allow the truth to get in the way of a good story. Mr. Holmes.

Jackson Holmes: Okay, so I got the answer. Joe Centorino used to be the assistant state attorney for public corruption in Miami-Dade County, maybe you know. And dare I say, if -- I'm 73 years old, of the 10 people who have helped me the most in my entire life is -- among those is Joe Centorino. He's now working as Inspector General, as you may know, okay, for Miami Beach. It's really funny. You know him maybe better than I do, although I'm not certain because he did so much to help me. But anyways, because he can get on this horse. Listen, I apologize to you, Mayor Lago, but one of the problems I'm having is that you don't -- you're so -- I -- how do I say this?

Mayor Lago: Tell me, tell me.

Mr. Holmes: Except that I swear under penalties of perjury as to what I'm about to say. You are so dishonest that it's dragging me down. And one of the first jobs of an inspector general, hopefully, ideally, since it's in the Citizens' Bill of Rights for the Ethics Commission, is that people have to -- can be held accountable for not telling the truth. And you may come again to regret this suggestion you're making because -- and yes, we have a city that is a cesspool of corruption due to it being a developer-ocracy wherein certain elected officials get so much money from developers, they care less about the voters, they care less about democracy, they subordinate democracy to developer-ocracy, and it becomes a cesspool of corruption. Thank you.

Mayor Lago: Always a pleasure.

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