

MONTHLY MEETING SUMMARY

Board Members: Bentonne Snay, Jane Moskowitz, Richard Thurer, Elizabeth Newman, Pat Thaller, Janet Nostro, John Wander, Thomas “Mac” Hooten and Marjorie Wilkoff

Speakers: CG Dems member and Moderator Martha Schoolman, Coral Gables Commissioner and Mayoral Candidate Pat Keon and Commission Candidates Javier Baños, Alex Bucelo and Kirk Menendez

CG Dems Members: Annie Betancourt, Julie Samkoff, Maria Elena Lopez, Ally Easley, Ruth Balestra, Madeline Shirley, Roman Lyskowski, Kerry Gruson, Marti Wakshlag, Lisbeth Bustin, Penny Thurer, John Funchion, Ruth Balestra, Susan Schultz Rubin, Roberta Neway, Susan Chetwood, Sheryl Gold, Monique Selman, Dianne Hooten, Beatriz Portela, Jose Valdes-Fauli, John Newman, Barbara Zwick, Linda Fernandez, Mari Gonzalez, Vivian San Juan, Jane Mass and Amelia Tournal

Guests: Floreana Martinez, Arun Ravindan, Marjorie Baron, Brian Olson, Vanessa Blanco, David Perez, Maria Cruz, Marlon Ebbert, Max Willner, Vanessa Blanco, Donna DiGiacomo, JC Diaz Padron, Julie Berlin, David Perez, Sandra Malek and Ariel Fernandez

I. Call to Order and Welcome

- President Bentonne Snay called the meeting to order at 6:30pm. She went over the Zoom meeting rules and how we would proceed with the candidates speaking, the Q&A session with Moderator Martha Schoolman and use of the chat box for questions.

II. CG Dems Business

a. Treasurer’s Report

- Treasurer Richard Thurer advised that the current treasury balance is \$2,949.97. We have recently made donations in the amount of \$250 each to the Coconut Grove Crisis Food Pantry, the food pantry at the Coral Gables Congregational Church and the Miami-Dade Young Democrats Period Project.
- 2021 Operating Budget will be prepared once the new board members are installed and plans for the year are determined, expected in March/April.

b. CG Dems Membership Update

- Membership Chair Elizabeth Newman reported that we have 130 members in good standing and 20 members in need of renewal. Elizabeth is contacting those who are behind.
- Elizabeth encouraged people to join to be able to take part in the March 9th Members Only Annual Meeting. *Join/renew at www.coralgablesdems.org/membership-renewal*
- March 9 is our First Members Only Annual Meeting/Board Election and 2022 Plan of Action Our plan of action includes a plan modeled after what Stacey Abrams did in Georgia to turn the state blue, with an emphasis on working with Miami-Dade’s Hispanic communities. WE will continue collaborating with the Blue Wave Coalition Miami-Dade, several nonprofit organizations and other local Democratic clubs and caucuses.

c. Update on Community Volunteer Activities

- Support for Coconut Grove & Other Crisis Food Pantries
 - Janet Nostro advised that since the pandemic, 170 families have received meals from the Coconut Grove food pantry each week thanks to donations. They are still looking for non-perishable items, canned goods and personal items/toiletries. *Details regarding Coconut Grove Food Pantry and making donations to them and/or the Coral Gables Congregational Church food pantry are on our website at https://www.coralgablesdems.org/food_pantries and to make an on-line donation to the pantry, go to <https://coconutgrovecrisisfoodpantry.com>*
 - Also, on our CG Dems website are details for making donations to the Miami-Dade Young Democrats Period Product Drive at https://www.coralgablesdems.org/other_donations.
- Community Outreach, Voter Registration & Vote By Mail Renewals

Vice President Jane Moskowitz reported that Senate Bill 90, if passed, would limit vote-by-mail applications to one election cycle and require everyone who signed up for mail ballots in 2020 to reapply after July 2021. Passing this bill would be irresponsible, time-intensive, very expensive and would suppress voting, especially by older and disabled voters. *We are encouraged to write Senator Ileana Garcia. Bentonne provided a sample letter and e-mail address in the chat Garcia.iliana@flsenate.gov with a cc to her aide at bertron.kim@flsenate.gov*
- Connecting with Hispanic Voters re: Cuban American Dems & Local Nonprofit Partners for Community Engagement Activities

After the Coral Gables elections are over in April, Bentonne advised that our club is beginning to focus on reaching out to get to know and to register Hispanic voters and let them know our values and that we are not socialists. Bentonne advised that she has joined the Miami-Dade Cuban American Democratic Club and suggested others get involved. She is also in the process of connecting with several nonprofit organizations that work in disenfranchised communities to increase voter registration and VBM sign ups.

III. Coral Gables Group III Commission Candidates

- Candidates Javier Baños, Alex Bucelo and Kirk Menendez presented their platforms for mayor and answered questions from CG Dems Member, FIU American Literature Professor and Moderator Martha Schoolman. A few questions asked by meeting attendees were taken from the floor. Martha was introduced by Jane Moskowitz.

Javier Baños

- Javier Baños has been in public service for 15 years and served on City's retirement board. He is a CPA and an attorney.
- One of his main issues is the City's **public pension reform**. Believes city and resident input is important. Pension system faces many challenges. Has served on public boards addressing public pension administration and reform. Pension fund is currently only 65% funded.
- **Zoning**- Believes there has been poor communication by our commission on City zoning issues/Miracle Mile. Has gone door-to-door meeting residents. People are confused about what the Mile is going to look like and do not understand or approve. He is not in



favor of building higher on Miracle Mile or in favor of the proposed zoning changes. There has been no rendition of what the plan is. It needs to be made clear as businesses are suffering.

Alex Bucelo

- Alex Bucelo is an attorney, born and raised in Coral Gables. Family law firm. Praised firefighters and police. Historical, traditional values.
- He stated that the health of the pension system is an “under the rug issue.” He has spoken to members of the retirement board. Said pension should be fully funded in 10 years. Will continue to make strides.
- Advocates for better traffic control/speed bumps/traffic circles, more safety including more off-duty police patrolling neighborhoods.
- Favors “controlled development” with respect to the zoning code and Miracle Mile.
- Thinks zoning code should remain against skyscrapers. He favors mixed use buildings (live, work, play) and is against the proposed zoning changes for Miracle Mile.

Kirk Menendez

- Kirk Menendez is a retired attorney and life-long Coral Gables resident. Very involved with Coral Gables Youth Center and has been on the Youth Center Board longer than anyone.
- Has an extensive background in government affairs and legislation.
- Believes people feel disenfranchised and want their voices heard.
- Need to focus on small and family-owned businesses so we do not lose them.
- **Zoning-** feels parking on the Mile is a main issue. Parking has been reduced and we need to facilitate residents going to the Mile as not everyone can walk several blocks.
He disagrees that higher buildings will bring life back to the Mile. We need to balance construction and development. We need to find common ground. Thinks height should be limited. There has been a back and forth from the community and elected officials and it is important all hear each other out and look at other suggestions.
- **Pension-** Pleased to know our city is making strides regarding the health of the City’s pension system to make sure pension issues do not return. Will help resolve the pension issue if elected.

IV. Coral Gables Mayoral Candidate Presentation

- Mayoral Candidate and Commissioner Patricia Keon presented her platform for mayor and answered questions from Martha Schoolman. A few questions from the chat which were taken from meeting attendees were also addressed.
 - Elected to City Commission in 2013 and has served on many Boards including Planning & Zoning, Senior Citizens Advisory Board and the Board of Adjustment. She is a former nurse.
 - To address **COVID-19**, she would continue under the same direction and referenced the difficulty in fining people who do not wear masks. CG made testing available to residents, but the program had to be discontinued due to lack of vaccines. Firefighters, paramedics



and some homebound residents have been vaccinated. She sponsored a community conversation on COVID.

- On **climate change**, three years ago she sponsored a community forum at FIU. Addressed the issues of sea-level rise, climate change, septic tanks and sewer lines. Will work with water keepers to ban use of fertilizers during rainy season. Does not see the septic system as an immediate issue as all are on high-level properties and all waterfront properties have sewers. Mentioned the importance of getting cardboard boxes out of the swells. Encourages **solar** and the city has installed and added it along with some electric cars.
- **Social justice issues** are not a tremendous issue for CG. She has sponsored various inclusion acts to include all people, including those with disabilities.
- On **Zoning**, she believes the job of the City Commissioners is to serve the best interest of the residents and businesses. Florida law/zoning codes disallow telling builders they cannot build. CG zoning codes ensure aesthetics, high quality and safety. If it is consistent with the code, then developers can build. Currently, there are no provisions for mixed-use buildings in CG code, which needs to be revised. Issues with the code have polarized the community.
- She voted for Gables Station as it met code requirements and is environmentally beneficial as it will reduce car traffic.
- She stated that she has received 8 or 9 contributions from developers that she has known for a long time.
- Meeting attendee Sharon Gold raised the issue of voter referendum. In other cities there are different ways that voters get a say in city policies. Some things can be done by voter referendum and voters want to be part of the system.
- Meeting attendee Roberta Neway raised the issue of bikeways. Pat Keon voted against the last proposal for bike lanes and stated that she thinks they are important but explained she voted against it due to many objections by residents. Need to start at the grassroots and get consensus before bike lanes can be made. Baños agreed that we need a balancing test. Menendez said the number of walkers and bikers has increased tremendously during the pandemic. Bike lanes need to be promoted but residents need to be involved.

V. Upcoming CG Dems Monthly Meetings via Zoom at 6:30 p.m.

- 2/22: Coral Gables Mayoral Candidate and Vice Mayor Vince Lago and Commission Group II Candidates will speak and answer questions. Moderator will be Martha Schoolman.
- 3/9: Annual Mtg w/Board Election and 2022 Plan of Action plus Julie Becker on Blue Wave 2020 Lessons Learned and Plan of Action for 2022

VI. Other Business

Bentonne Snay

- Bentonne informed everyone that she has joined Braver Angels, a national group dedicated to bringing Dems and GOP members together to help bridge the political divide among Americans. She encouraged others to join as this will be important for communicating with Hispanics in particular. \$11 annual membership. For info, see [Welcome - Braver Angels](http://braverangels.org) <http://braverangels.org>
- Monique Selman announced that there will be a March 11 Candidate forum by Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce and UM. *She will provide info to Bentonne for eBlasting to all.*

VII. The meeting was Adjourned by President Bentonne Snay at 8:17pm.

Minutes recorded and written by Secretary Marjorie Wilkoff with edits and approval by President Bentonne Snay.