



Monday, February 22, 2021
6:30PM to 8:20 PM
Via Zoom

MONTHLY MEETING SUMMARY Coral Gables Candidate Presentations Part II

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

Speakers: Martha Schoolman, CG Dems member and moderator; Coral Gables Mayoral Candidate Vince Lago; Group II Commission Candidates: Rhonda Anderson, Alexander Luis Haq, Jackson Rip Holmes, Mayra Joli, Jose Valdes Fauli and Tania Cruz-Gimenez

CG Dems Members: Sheryl Gold, Pat Keon, Victor Balestra, John Funchion, Dianna Hooton, Ally Easley, Lisbeth Bustin, Barbara Zwick, Roman Lyskowski, Jeannett Slesnick, Maria Elena Lopez, Louise Silverstein, Roberta Neway, Mari Gonzalez, Linda Fernandez, Jill Berman

Guests: Brett Gillis, CJ Gimenez, Yvette Perez, Oscar Sosa, Maru Sosa, Tom Zelensky, Brian Hernandez, Elaine DeValle, Raul Rodriguez, David Perez, Javier Baños, JoAnn Bander, Juan Diaz Padron, Ulrich Merten, Susi Davis, Yvette Perez, Max Willner, Susan Kowaleski, Susan Chetwood, Czar Roe, Julie Berlin, Christopher Crespo, Juan Diaz Padron, Kitty Terry, Mike Terry, Gordon Sokoloff

I. Call to Order and Welcome

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

II. CG Dems Business

a. Vice President Jane Moscovitz spoke on the importance of contacting senators and representatives re SB 40.

- This is an attempt to end vote-by-mail and if it passes, it will take away all the gains we made with vote-by-mail in 2020.
- Bentonne has sent an e-mail blast with details re contacting representatives and will be sending another blast.
- Details are on our website at www.coralgablesdems.org under Get Involved “Say No to SB 90.”

III. Coral Gables Mayoral Candidate Commissioner Vince Lago

- Candidate Vince Lago presented his platform for mayor and answered questions from CG Dems Member and FIU American Literature Professor Martha Schoolman. A few questions asked by meeting attendees were taken from the floor. Martha was introduced by Jane Moscovitz.

Vince Lago (Republican)

Introduction and Platform

- Born in Louisiana. Grew up in Coral Gables (CG) and lives in the Gables. FIU Grad.
- Majored in Construction Engineering Management
- Partner in BDI Construction Company- builds mainly schools and medical facilities.

- Has served on 6 different boards including building and zoning. Resigned to run for Commissioner and was elected the first time around.
- While on commission had open door policy and provided monthly newsletters

Questions

Issue of affordable housing and the CG Plan which lists as a principal goal: “a variety of housing opportunities for all income levels.”

- Thinks there is affordable rent in North Gables and gave 100 Edgewater as an example.
- Admits City is less accessible to non-wealthy.
- City “falls short” on housing opportunities for teachers. Sees potential for city to offer teachers more affordable housing and needs to work on zoning code to make this happen. Would have to incentivize developers. Units would need to be smaller.
- Against shared housing components.

Issue of Zoning and Development

- Stated he has voted against new, large developments. Voted “no” on height of project on US 1 and on Miracle Mile as he thinks bigger is not always better.
- Claims being “thoughtful” and asking why people want to live here is best approach.
- If height is increased then the City should give a trade-off that benefits the public, for example, the 4,000 square foot Valencia Park.
- Reduce FAR (floor to area ratio).
- Important to bring community into zoning discussions.
- Says he has no issue with remote parking on Miracle Mile.

Issue of working in construction management and having realtors, architects and developers among his donors.

- Says his values are honesty and transparency.
- Says he voted no on Ponce Plaza.
- No compromise on City values and will vote in line with City standards.
- For additional FAR or density, says we need to get opinions, have meetings.
- If outside of norm, need to discuss with residents before approving developments.

Partisanship and Values as a Republican

- Does not condone Proud Boys and condemns all such un-American behavior by extremist groups.



- Does not believe issues on abortion and immigration are issues for the city. They are Federal Issues only. Local level is non-partisan.
- Says he has no higher political aspirations besides the Gables Mayoral race.
- Says he receives ideas from Democrats, Republicans and Independents
- Would institute “Open Door Fridays” and Town Hall Meetings for residents.
- Supports competent people regardless of party.
- Supports solar in homes and electric cars; says that the environment is not a Democrat or Republican issue.
- Claims issues of sanctuary cities and gun legislation are outside scope and realm of local government.
- Has supported Democratic ideas including human rights issues.

Question asking who he voted for

- Thinks a person’s vote is sacred and would not answer. Will serve everyone in community.

Question asked about mechanism for handling issues with street traffic/safety.

- Can call or e-mail him directly on this, provided his phone number in chat.

Question re GOP Support

- Stated he is not a Trump supporter and did not support Capitol riots, is a middle of the road individual. Answers to everyone, is pro-environment and LGBTQ and supported Democrats JJR and Javier Fernandez

Question re Vaccinations

- Firefighters and police have been vaccinated and he is meeting on Tuesday with state senator at City Hall. Will discuss plans with governor and mayor.
- Proud to have led the City’s testing efforts.
- Pushed for caregivers and significant others of elderly to get vaccinated.

Question re interacting with Gables administrative staff members.

- Will implement strategies like open door/Sunshine meetings on Fridays and have meetings once a month with residents, staff and elected officials.
- Reiterated his values of transparency and accountability.
- Says City staff work for residents and that rude behavior is unacceptable.

IV. Coral Gables Group II Commission Candidates

Rhonda Ann Anderson (Democrat)

- CG resident for 33 years. Involved in city issues (traffic and development) since 2004.
- Major issues are public safety, traffic, environment and crime watch.
- Formerly served on the CG Public Safety Commission as well as the Sustainability Advisory Board and the Planning and Zoning Board.
- Goal is to work with residents and make them aware of what is occurring and what is “coming down the pipeline.”

Tania Cruz-Gimenez (Democrat)

- Cuban Democrat and Gables resident for 14 years.
- Civil rights activist since 9/11 which changed her opinion of government.
- Inspired to run by mismanagement of streetscaping project on Miracle Mile.



- Says everything that matters to her lives within the city limits.
- Downtown needs revitalization and other issues of concern include downtown, traffic/safety and septic tank conversion to sewers.
- Must work together and be respectful to succeed.

Alexander Haq (Democrat)

- Offers a fresh set of ideas and has no ties to special interest groups.
- In favor of “smart” development and stacked parking garages to save space.
- Must incentivize small businesses and young professionals on Miracle Mile.
- Accessibility for disabled residents on the Mile is important.
- Priority is achieving carbon neutrality with electric vehicles for City.

Jackson “Rip” Holmes (Democrat)

- Born and raised in CG; says his family has oldest property on Miracle Mile and his grandfather knew George Merrick.
- Says downtown parking is a total nightmare and the Commission wants to ruin Miracle Mile with “runaway” development.
- Has attended most Gables commission meetings since 1999.
- Wants to defeat the zoning code re-write and is against remote parking.

Mayra Joli (Republican)

- Been in Gables for 25 years. Immigration attorney.
- Former Democrat, now Republican.
- Running to “stop the insanity”, put residents first and break cycle of over-development.
- Here to serve the residents first.

Jose Valdes-Fauli (Democrat)

- Lifelong Democrat, 35-year banking career. Served as President and CEO of local banks. Retired 12 years ago. Has been involved in Community work.
- Co-founder of Heath Crisis Network and he is an FIU trustee, former president of Mercy Hospital Advisory Board and one of first to provide seed money to bring Art Basel to Miami.
- Will dedicate his time to working as a commissioner as he has no other job.
- Stated that he is a listener, not a talker.
- Will bring different perspective to commission because of financial and business expertise.
- Does not see things like his brother, Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli.

Questions

Candidates Vision on Sustainability- What Can be Done?

Valdes-Fauli

- Waterfront housing on Gables Waterways will need help with sea level rise as in due time, people whose homes are on canals will not be able to access the bay.
- Says sea level rise is a major point to work on and trash/garbage in the bay needs to be controlled.

Joli



- Why do we continue building when we talk about sustainability? Stop developing.

Holmes

- Advocates use of hydrogen fuel cell energy like NASA; says he is a clean energy advocate.

Haq

- Should use natural gas and then go to more sustainable and eco-friendly energy sources.
- Solar panels in business and homes, neighborhoods need access to natural gas. Give residents option of natural gas and renewable energy sources.

Cruz-Gimenez

- Looks at things differently. Looks at projects that aim to boost the environment and the economy -- green business and infrastructure.
- Preserve architecture. We need to be a model throughout the country- resiliency and livability.
- Sees the present time as the perfect opportunity to look to improve our central business district.

Anderson

- Need to be pro-active. Incentivize things that are good for the environment. Reuse rainwater. Work with universities.
- No parking garages below sea level. Remove greenhouse gasses. Lover of mangroves.
- Plans to look carefully at septic tank issue. Continue conversations.

Zoning and Development- why do they take the positions they do and whom do they benefit? What would the Mile look like and how would we get there?

Haq

- Against changing zoning code. Against large developments. Thinks zoning code is a short-term solution to a long-term problem.
- Invest in raw talent, young professionals, working families.

Cruz-Gimenez

- The problem is no cohesiveness, vision or strategy to redevelopment the Mile.
- Fighting same battles over and over. Need new group of people. Everyone needs to sit down together and come up with a vision to promote economic development and revitalize downtown.
- Toxic environment and lack of respect at City Hall. Think creatively- 21st Century.

Anderson

- Because zoning code allows for 70 ft. buildings, we must incentivize 3-4 story buildings.
- Encourage new, vibrant buildings on the Mile. Make it pedestrian friendly- more trees and more safety.
- Promote projects like umbrella project on Giralda Plaza.

Valdes-Fauli



- City should not be involved in private enterprise - setting rents and building on Miracle Mile. Landlords should be responsible.
- All current commissioners favored development. Now they are running from what they voted for.

Joli

- Need to keep the Mile the way it is. Does not envision tall buildings.
- Need to keep mom and pop businesses. Nothing wrong with way Mile looks.

Holmes

- Needs women's clothing stores. In 1998, there were conversations with high profile retail developers but now city refuses to talk about bringing in national chain/department stores.

Do people misunderstand the zoning issues, or do you want to address what another candidate said?

Holmes

- Commission is not being honest about current codes and they need to remain as they are now but bring in big flagship stores like H&M.

Joli

- The issue is that the commission is not representing residents. They listen to residents but act on behalf of the developers. Developers have no place at this table.

Valdes-Fauli

- City leaders and architects need to explain current codes clearly and simply so all residents can understand. Need to create Cliff Note versions.

Anderson

- When she was on the Planning and Zoning Board, they did the right thing re Miracle Mile, but Zoning Board members are not allowed to discuss/listen to residents. Would change this if elected.
- Residents' voices should always be heard.

Haq

- Disagrees with flagship chain stores.
- Need to encourage small businesses, working families, young professionals.

Cruz-Gimenez

- Believes there is much miscommunication by the City. Need someone who can talk to people on both sides and is good at translating. Example: FAR. She will do this.

Q & A From Participants

Question about achieving a carbon-neutral city.

Joli



- Questions who will put in the money. We must be realistic. Need to get rid of septic tanks first and save big trees.

Anderson

- Many layers to this. Includes promoting use of low-emission vehicles, green roofs, rainwater storage and more electric charging stations.
- Sequester carbon and reduce emissions by promoting eco-friendly products to resident consumers.
- Supports the Citizens Climate Lobby.

Valdes-Fauli

- Says we need to accept that global warming exists and take it seriously.
- Thinks Dems do but Republicans do not.

Holmes

- Need to use NASA's fuel energy as it is the cleanest and it works.

Cruz-Gimenez

- Need to work more with FPL to find more renewable energy sources and have all Gables vehicles be electric.

Question about transferring historic building rights to developers.

Holmes

- This is classic Raul Valdes-Fauli. Attitude that developers can do no wrong. Agrees we need not transfer these rights to developers.

Anderson

- Agrees wholeheartedly that transfer of rights on the Mile should not be allowed.

Vales-Fauli

- As per the county ordinance, transfer of rights was allowed for 30-40 years.

Question about what to do to resolve the \$12 M budget deficit because of the pandemic?

Joli

- Coral Gables is a rich city. Wasteful spending must stop. Stop Commissioners' pet projects.

Valdes-Fauli

- Very concerned with finances, especially with 40% of tax base paid for by businesses. Important that this does not change. Every single property is being affected.
- City needs someone with financial expertise. Need someone who can anticipate this before November when assessments come out.

Haq

- Property values are going up. Amenities are going down. Need to reprioritize where our finances are going and how we can best use them.
- Commission needs to have a clear and consistent message.



Cruz-Gimenez

- Will audit all City departments to increase efficiency. City using antiquated procedures.
- Move to on-line platform, go virtual, e-permitting, reduce waste and paper, historical database for documents.

Anderson

- Staffing is one of the largest expenses. Look carefully to reduce costs.
- Eliminate unnecessary positions and put employees where they are needed.
- Maintain quality services in public safety and waste management.
- Eliminate wasteful projects or put them on hold.

Holmes

- For low taxes. Says not to cut police, fire or trash pick-up.
- Everything else is fair game. People are overpaid at City Hall.

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

- 3/9: Annual Mtg w/Board Election and Julie Becker on Blue Wave 2020 Lessons Learned and Plan of Action for 2022

VI. Other Business

- Maria Elena Lopez has organized a candidate endorsement committee with Miami-Dade Dems and Coral Gables Dems.

VII. The meeting was Adjourned by President Bentonne Snay at 8:20 p.m.

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