

**Remarks by City Manager Patrick Salerno  
March 10, 2010**

Good morning everyone.

We are here as the result of the Commission's request for a briefing on the status of City affairs.

Let me begin by saying we are all *Gableites* and we are lucky people. We are fortunate because we live or work in one of the best cities in the country. Coral Gables is a city of great natural beauty, a planned city, a city rich in history, a city blessed with tradition, a growing city, a place to be proud of and a place that most people want to come back to.

I start with this chest-beating about our City because I believe it.

From time to time, we hear the nay-sayers: Coral Gables is afraid of change, Coral Gables is against development, Coral Gables is stuck in the past, but I don't believe it for a minute.

Coral Gables is an engaging city which is already one of the greatest places to live. I believe very strongly that it will become more so in the next decade.

But before I get into the meat of my remarks, I want to share with you my findings so far. They come as a result of my monthly meetings over lunch with employees (entry level to first level supervisors) representing all City departments and after having met with – individually or in groups – hundreds of members of the public, and some personal observations.

FROM MEETINGS WITH STAFF:

What is good about working for the City of Coral Gables?

- The opportunity to serve a special community.
- The opportunity to work with talented fellow coworkers.

- Coral Gables is an exciting place.
- Working here is enjoyable.
- Working here provides good professional experience.
- There is a variety of challenges.
- The salary and benefits.

What is bad about working for the City of Coral Gables?

- Lack of job security (due to the economy).
- It takes too long to get things done.
- Department managers do not take into account the effect of their decisions on other departments.
- There is insufficient employee training.
- Technology needs to be improved to help staff do their jobs.

What obstacles keep you from doing a great job?

- Budget challenges. Staff would like to know how can we move past them?
- Lack of direction from some department heads to staff.

How can we better recognize employee achievements?

- Simple "Thank You's."

MY OBSERVATIONS:

- The Mayor and members of this Commission are some of the most talented and dedicated individuals I have ever served.
- Members of the Coral Gables community are passionate about the City.
- The quality and dedication of front-line staff members is first-rate.
- The breadth and depth of services provided by the City, with few exceptions, is impressive.
- The City can be more customer-friendly.
- At times some of our unions seem to be tone-deaf to the reality that the good economic times are over, at least for a while.

- Staff does not routinely provide adequate information to the Mayor and Commissioners to do their jobs as policy makers.
- Many people look to Coral Gables as a place that is well run. (I want to make this perception a reality).

I want to talk briefly about why I believe Coral Gables is a great place to live today and more importantly focus on “how we must improve it if we want to keep the City Beautiful.”

Coral Gables’ inviting parks, shaded streets and historic landmarks are some of the physical characteristics that epitomize the City. But there are other features that are less tangible yet equally defining, such as: our cultural diversity and small town values.

The City faces many varied and significant challenges that threaten the City Beautiful in all its connotations. But these are also times of great opportunity.

The task ahead of us is not easy. Let’s face it, times are tough. The recession is taking its toll on individuals, families and businesses. City government has been impacted too, not only with reduced resources (having recently eliminated 67 positions, the low lying fruit has been picked), but also with increased demand for services. Difficult times call for ingenuity and resourcefulness. They call for us to pull together to advance our City and keep moving toward our goals.

So, to quote one of my favorite philosophers, “The future ain’t what it used to be.” There may be no truer words to describe our world today.

Some of you might know that this quote is from Yogi Berra. These are challenging times indeed. Some might say downright “scary” and I am not here to provide Knute Rockne-type remarks. The credit crunch has touched virtually every corner of America from Wall Street to Miracle Mile and the pinch has been felt widely. Certainly government here in the City is no less immune to the difficulties posed by this recession.

What used to be an easy home run for increasing revenue each year has become more like hitting with two strikes. Skyrocketing property values once fed the economy and increased City revenues but, as we all know, that has stopped abruptly and reversed course.

While our City has had to make difficult choices to keep its budget viable, it is because of those actions I can say - we have taken a direct blow to the chin and are still standing. I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your support of key initiatives in this regard. While some cities are stalled, Coral Gables is moving forward with initiatives that will pay off in the future.

It will take considerable “fiscal discipline and leadership” to make the state of our City strong. The foremost need of this government is financial stability and sustainability and that is what I see as my first task and duty. That is not to say that we will not conduct the basic work of the City or that it will come at the expense of the present. But, if we don't solve our financial issues, then the issue of where to focus our attention and priorities will only be an interesting intellectual discussion.

Our City Beautiful is made up of people and places, institutions and high quality of life standards. So, we must achieve that delicate balance of preserving the community we know and love while achieving financial stability.

I believe we need to focus on six core priorities that I believe reflect our current challenges, our vision and our values as a City Beautiful.

These priorities are:

- Economic Progress

We've got to be the “City of choice”. We need to be the City of choice for entrepreneurs, business leaders and members of the various creative professions. Creating a vibrant downtown is key. Winston Churchill said: “We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.” A great city is

often defined by its creation of great places. My experience has shown me you are only as strong as your weakest link, which is why I view the Miracle Mile streetscape project of the utmost importance. Nurturing and strengthening the heart of Coral Gables means making the downtown – its buildings and public places – a place that attracts, delights, excites and comforts residents and visitors.

- Places And Spaces

If well-built and understood, Coral Gables will remain aesthetically and spiritually pleasing; if pleasing, our past will be appreciated; if appreciated, the City will be cared for; and if cared for, our future will be long sustained. To that end, we must protect and enhance the City's historic resources. We need to protect and respect our natural areas and open spaces as places of recreation, renewal and reflection. We will need to continue to invest in infrastructure, facilities and in opportunities and amenities that contribute to the quality of life. We must recognize cultural facilities - such as the new museum - and events as opportunities to improve our sense of community. If we focus solely on reducing costs and cutting programs, our future will be bleak.

- Public Safety And Core Services

This is really our primary mission as a City.

- Strong Neighborhoods

- A Compassionate Community; and

- High Value Government.

Finally, for all of these things to work, city government must perform efficiently and effectively. I call this high value government and the public expects this from the City. You hired me, in part, for that reason.

This concept of high value government is an important one. It means that citizens trust city government, the City is run well and we do what we say we are going to do.

It's time to focus on the most pressing issue Coral Gables will face in the next few years.

No, it's neither pensions nor taxes. It's bigger than both.

If we want to reform our retirement plans and get control of pension costs before they further squeeze out other public priorities, hold the line on taxes, improve services, such as public safety and roads as well as draw new business activity. Coral Gables has to stop thinking about each of these activities separately and start thinking of how city government operates as a whole.

The biggest problem isn't any single problem, but how the machine of government functions. That affects how much money we need to pave roads, serve our seniors, fund parks and recreation, pay police officers and firefighters.

It's not a simple matter of cutting spending or raising taxes. It's a matter of reviewing everything the City does to see if it can be done better, at a lower cost, or must be done at all.

*When the City doesn't know it's millions in the hole halfway through last fiscal year, nor has adequate financial reporting and controls, we have a serious problem.*

*When the Granada Golf Course maintenance and storage facility gets broken into three times over a period of a few months and it's not detected because staff did not check that the security system was properly installed, we have a serious problem.*

*When staff are called upon to prepare resolutions, ordinances and agreements for which they are not equipped to handle, we have a serious problem.*

*When new development projects that create jobs and increase our tax base can take years to get approved, we have a serious problem.*

The City needs an organization that will rethink how city government works. How we do that is what comes next. That effort has already begun, but we have a ways to go.

In this regard, I have asked myself, what can I do that would truly make a difference? How can I truly set an example? What needs to be done?

To use the example of a professional or college football team; every so often, teams go through a rebuilding program. The team doesn't like it, but in most cases that rebuilding process produces a new enthusiastic, stronger and more talented team, better equipped to compete.

Therefore, I have begun to build on the best of what came before in the organization and build a team, to find the right people for a particular job and enable them to do the right thing. I'm sure we'll find some new people and identify some strong existing staff to move this organization forward. I want to emphasize that I value staff members who are committed to the success of this organization and community. I can't fix things 'til I know what's going on and I can't and won't accept the 3 monkeys:

- Hear No Evil
- See No Evil
- Speak No Evil.

We must and will transform the City's internal culture of complacency. Some senior staff are resisting the reality that a new day is here and a new work ethic and culture is being instituted – one that demonstrates passion, exudes eagerness, intensity and inspiration as we keep both an eye on the moment and an eye on the future.

I recently filled two key positions with talented individuals... and I am close to bringing on board more talented professionals... we have amazing challenges and we need amazing people.

The commission has charged staff with establishing a new era of fiscal responsibility and I am going to continue to get the best and brightest to make this organization more accountable, responsive and customer service oriented.

We will seek continuous improvement in the services we provide. We will look for added efficiencies, we will consolidate when it makes sense, we will restructure as necessary to be effective and increase accountability to our customers. We are an organization in transition – in the process of making changes, of making new things, and making things new.

I am not going to mince words. Real-self assessment and change is tough work, but we have begun to make important progress. It's time and resource intensive, it's uncomfortable and it can create uncertainty, disagreement and the need to make difficult decisions. But the business of city government is too important for us to do anything less, as we seek to ensure a City with a "game on" attitude and spirit as we work towards the goal of "creating the most livable City in America."

Following any discussion you may have, we will briefly present a preliminary financial outlook and then hear from Fausto Gomez, the City's state legislative advocate, on what's happening in Tallahassee that can affect us.