

Excerpts from the State of the City Address
By Coral Gables Mayor Don Slesnick
Delivered to the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce Breakfast Meeting
on September 17, 2009 at the Biltmore Hotel

Good morning, Coral Gables. Yes, this is "*The City Beautiful*." It is a City known for its flowing fountains, historic structures, stately homes, beautiful trees, accessible parks, meandering waterways and exciting cultural events. Coral Gables is not, however, a reality version of "Pleasantville." Coral Gables is a sprawling, culturally diverse urban community situated in the midst of a great metroplex. Every day its citizens encounter difficult social, political and economic hurdles.

A Past President of the Florida League of Cities told me that during his term, he visited over 200 municipalities covering the length and breadth of the state, from Pensacola to Key West, and it never ceased to amaze him that a person knows immediately when he enters Coral Gables. It is not solely the lush vegetation or the Mediterranean architecture or the warmth of its people; it's the total package which creates a special "sense of place." But, this is not "Wonderland." This is not "Oz." This is not "Valhalla." Coral Gables is a typical 21st century community trying to make a "go of it" in the face of new and unexpected challenges.

We have weathered a highly publicized political embarrassment, reminding us that we are not immune from such situations. We have faced major financial set-backs caused by the fiscal failures of the private sector economy, and the relentlessly rising costs of doing business. A local bank president recently observed that this was the "perfect economic storm." As we look ahead, we ask: Who are we? What are we all about? My message is that our character is not defined by the tragedies or the challenges we face. Our character is defined by how we respond to them, how we overcome adversity, and by how we move forward in a productive manner.

Last month, I convened a workshop of local elected leaders and education administrators who gathered to talk about the growing absence of civility in our society. There is an alarming rise of acrimony and animosity in our public discussion. It is a sad moment for our democracy when we can no longer participate in the tough, intellectual debate, which has made this country great, without using words of anger or hatred. At that meeting, we discussed plans for special civics programming in the schools. We talked about constituent academies where residents can learn more about their city government, understand more about municipal operations, and discuss openly the many aspects of local governance. It was not a session devoted to complaining about a problem; it was focused on determining ways to make a difference in our society. We started by pledging our commitment as public officials to set an example of honest

dealings and personal integrity. There is no sense in preaching to other people if you can't be a role model.

If you've been exposed to the news media lately, you will know that all governments are faced with declining revenues and increased expenses. No one foresaw the extent to which real estate taxes and other expected revenue streams would decline.

As we go forward, our Commission wants to keep Coral Gables' services "first class" in order to keep our people safe, our environment clean and to do it at a reasonable, affordable price. That is where "the rub" comes: the definition of "affordable" (an issue which we will continue to ponder).

On the expenditure side, we are reducing the number of employees in the City's table of organization, freezing wages and reducing various benefits. Additionally, we are further enhancing the efficiencies of our operations. We are continuing to institute (through collective bargaining with the unions) additional cost-saving measures in regards to the employees' pension plan.

The City Manager has committed that he will continue to examine possibilities for increased efficiency and fiscal effectiveness. All alternatives will be explored, except when the municipal services that you depend on: police, fire, trash, garbage, recycling, parks and recreational facilities would be negatively impacted.

We have provided for specific capital expenses in this year's budget. These are one-time commitments to repair infrastructure and to build better city facilities for future generations. As an example, let me highlight two such projects that are important to the City, projects that will attract private and public investment (other than local tax dollars): (1) The cultural center in downtown Coral Gables, comprised of the museum and the art cinema. These projects are supported by private charitable partners and state grants. Both venues will bring cultural vibrancy to the downtown community as we try to attract customers to our restaurants and shops. (2) The dredging of our main canal. It is an historic waterway which adds charm and value to our entire community. The channel has gathered much silt over the past 80 years and is becoming un-navigable in some areas. Half of the cost of this project will be paid for with state monies.

Let me mention my goals for the central business district during the coming 18 months of my Mayor's term: (1) Continue to encourage The Palace to move forward on the construction of a quality senior citizens' facility and a new municipal parking facility at the Andalusia/Douglas intersection. This is a project that will add to our commercial business district by improving the area and offering seniors a chance to stay in Coral Gables as they age; (2) Implement the news streetscape master plan for Miracle Mile and Giralda. It is a gorgeous vision for the future of our downtown. It will make our community one of the premier retail and restaurant destinations in South Florida; (3)

Keep the Biltmore Hotel open as a world-class facility. It goes without saying (but I will) that the Biltmore Hotel, as a private operation, owes the citizens a reasonable and fair rate of return on the property, but this is a wonderful hotel which has made us all proud by its world-wide reputation for being a premier resort – we want to keep it that way; (4) Complete the construction of the median on Ponce de Leon Boulevard north to the Tamiami Trail; (5) Create a public-private partnership to demolish and build a new garage on Andalusia by the Miracle Theatre (where the outdated, dilapidated, non-ADA compliant parking structure currently stands.)

In closing, I am reminded of an old saying that “skepticism is healthy, but cynicism is dangerous.” This is a time, my friends, to show pride in our community, express optimism for the future of our nation, demonstrate respect for others, and prayer that God will bless America and this City.