



May 20, 2004  
Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce

"State of the City" Address by Coral Gables Mayor Don Slesnick

*[Dedicated to the "team": Vice-Mayor Ralph Cabrera, Commissioner Chip Withers, Commissioner Bill Kerdyk, Commissioner Maria Anderson, City Manager Dave Brown, City Attorney Liz Hernandez, City Clerk Walter Foeman and the entire City workforce]*

Good Morning, Coral Gables.

This is my third "State of the City" address and I value the opportunity to speak to a broad cross section of residents, business owners, community leaders – long time friends and new acquaintances – persons with different backgrounds and different perspectives, but with a common vision of a great city.

Last year, I spoke to you about six Commission objectives by which we planned to make this wonderful city even better. Those themes were Downtown Revitalization, Neighborhood Enhancement, Improved Parking and Public Transportation, Preservation of Historic Resources, Increased Public Awareness and Enhanced Information Technology.

Despite facing numerous unexpected challenges this past year, your Commission has kept its collective eye on those goals by embracing a philosophy of "building bridges" between the past and the future, between people of different beliefs, and between the diverse interests of our population.

More than 60 years ago, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis astutely observed that. . .

“In the frank expression of conflicting opinions lies the greatest promise of wisdom in government action.”

That statement is as true now as it was then. Looking back at some of the City’s toughest challenges, the most difficult ones have involved neighbor versus neighbor disagreements – disputes that call for “the building of bridges” to achieve mutual understanding and reciprocal trust.

In an innovative “bridge building” approach to problem solving, the City encouraged the participants in certain neighborhood disputes to seek a workable compromise through the process of mediation. An outstanding example of this would be the University of Miami’s effort to expand its physical facilities which would impact an adjoining residential neighborhood. Through good faith negotiations, the University and the local homeowners association were able to reach an agreement for a future student housing complex based on a development plan sensitive to the requirements of the school administration and to the concerns of its next-door neighbors.

The Commission is hard at work to “bridge” the gap between the inherent development rights of property owners and the rights of neighbors to protect the quality of their residential life which is the hallmark of Coral Gables.

An out-dated comprehensive plan and its accompanying zoning code have failed to ease our growing pains. New house structures are being proposed that overwhelm their historic neighborhoods and new multi-family mid-rise buildings threaten to dwarf the quiet tree-lined streets nearby. The dilemma of allowing new construction to take place while preserving the scale and tranquility of residential spaces is a very real challenge for developers, homeowners and City government. It’s ultimately a balancing act between property rights and neighborhood values.

To facilitate the “bridging” of these gaps for the future, your City Commission has begun the arduous task of rewriting the entire Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code – a process that hasn’t taken place for many years. This complicated (and expensive) process will involve community meetings, public hearings and direct mail outreach which, if all goes well, will take approximately 9 months to complete.

Input is needed from everyone and we strongly encourage each of you to get informed and to get involved. The compromises and

conclusions will not be easy to reach but, by working together, we will be able to identify the right path for the future development of George Merrick's dream.

We have also set ourselves to the task of "building bridges" between old neighborhoods and newly annexed neighborhoods by insuring that municipal services are delivered efficiently, professionally, and equitably to all citizens, recognizing that we are but one unified community. This topic grows more challenging as we are now required to evaluate additional annexation petitions from bordering areas including Little Gables, High Pines and the Davis-Ponce triangle. While concentrating on today's issues, we must continue to shore up the bridges to our past – for the history of this place is what identifies us as "Coral Gables".

What better, more appropriate, place to start than Merrick House, the boyhood home of our founder and the house for which our city is named? The structure was discovered to be in deplorable condition, but has now undergone a significant rejuvenation including the installation of new flooring, the restoration of the plaster and wooden staircase, the renovation of the kitchen, and the upgrade of the air conditioning system.

Repair and preservation of the historic fountains and entranceways are underway, and the historic plaza at Granada and Coral Way has been renewed. Restoration of the City Hall cupola has also been scheduled while work continues to proceed in planning for our City's history museum to be located in the old Police and Fire station. We thank the Coral Gables Community Foundation and the Historic Homeowners Association for financially assisting the City in these efforts.

While treasuring our past, we must build bridges to our future. As was true of our forefathers (and mothers), we are compelled to embrace and incorporate tomorrow's technology without losing the importance of personal touch between City Hall and those whom it serves.

In an era when technology functions as a highway of information – it can also act as a bridge between people and their government. Fiber optic expansions, internet "hot spots", virtual offices are all a part of the new Coral Gables economy and we welcome them.

With a City budget that exceeds \$100 million and a work force of more than 850 employees, your government is handicapped with antiquated information technology which we have now committed to upgrade and

replace from top to bottom! Our goal is to enable persons to go online to report service problems, check on building permits, and pay city bills on a 24 hour a day/7 day a week basis.

I am pleased to say that this feature is now scheduled to move from "wish-list" to reality by 2006. It comes at a cost of time and money – over two million dollars in capital investment alone– but NOT upgrading the technology would prove to be even more costly.

With the new technology, we have made the commitment not to replicate old practices but to introduce new ones that increase efficiency, responsiveness and accountability.

Technology improvements also relate to public safety and our growing acceptance that we are operating during times of serious threats to our security and tranquility. We have had to change the way the City does business so that we can enhance our ability to protect our citizens and their property.

Our police officers are equipped with computers and defibrillators in their vehicles giving them greater capacity to fight crime and to assist in meeting the needs of victims at the scene of emergency situations. Recently, the City has established a Fire Rescue team on bicycles which are fully equipped with emergency gear to address the special needs of crowded events and congested downtown areas.

We continue to trust our police and fire departments to demonstrate (as they have always done) the capacity and capability to create a safety net upon which our citizens can rely in times of crisis and disturbance.

The "building of bridges" also relates to our international outreach programs. The "Flags on Ponce" program (originally initiated by this Chamber) serves as a graphic visual expression of the global economy which is key to our central business district. Over 90 different countries utilize Coral Gables as a strategic access hub to the rest of the world. Spain, Italy, Colombia, Barbados, and El Salvador are among a growing list of countries that have selected Coral Gables as the site for their Consulates while the Consul Generals of nations like Germany, Brazil, Trinidad/Tobago and Japan reside in our city. Furthermore, special offices representing the U.S. Department of State, the region of Catalonia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the Canary Islands and the World Olympians Association have been established within our business community.

Recent visits by officials from our sister cities of Aix-en-Provence, Pisa and Cartagena emphasize this community's role as a crossroads of culture and commerce.

As 2004 dawned, we were busy building a transportation bridge to link the Village of Merrick Park with Miracle Mile, the Metrorail with the business core, and the condos of Biltmore Way with shopping and dining. Our thoroughly modern trolleys with that "old-fashioned" appearance immediately caught the interest of residents, tourists and workers. Original projections estimated 1,000 passengers daily by year's end, but we have already established an average of over 1,500 riders a day and we have transported over 150,000 passengers since start-up! We are currently examining route and hour expansions but that will depend on the purchase of additional trolleys and the future reliability of the mechanical technology utilized in the vehicles. It should be noted that this project is funded through our share of the County's transportation tax and not at the expense of our property millage.

The expanded use of public transportation combined with the more than 600 new parking spaces in the Museum Garage (to be opened this December) will make a positive impact on the vehicular congestion which currently clogs our central business district.

We also need to bridge the gap that lies between our financial capacity and the City's infrastructure needs of the future. We have successfully restored most of our operating reserve funds which we discovered had been depleted for past projects. While we reluctantly voted to slightly raise taxes last year in order to help keep our financial house in order, we must look for new revenues to fund the replacement of aging, outdated and, in some cases, non-existent infrastructure.

Street lighting, parks, sewers, sidewalks, historic properties and a senior center are all capital projects which need to be addressed – but cannot become a reality without appropriate funding. That is why I remain committed to the consideration of floating a General Obligation Bond while interest rates are attractive and will continue to advocate for it in the year ahead.

Finally, your Commission has worked diligently to build an information bridge between City Hall and the citizenry by expanding the geographic coverage requirements for legal notices; increasing the circulation of the City's newsletter to include renters and business

owners; creating a weekly electronic news update on the web; and introducing an expanded and reformatted "City Services Guide" (copies of which are on your tables today).

We are proud of the many accomplishments achieved this year and salute the City employees who work tirelessly to implement Commission policies by transforming them into actual "real-life" programs. We thank the various citizen boards and committees which partner with the Commission in establishing a municipal vision responsive to the needs of our public.

Admittedly, there have been some efforts which have not turned out as well as hoped for or planned, but such "mis-fires" cannot be allowed to discourage us – but compel us to work diligently to achieve better results the next time.

As Memorial Day nears, let us remember that the price of freedom is not only measured in dollars but also in human life as we pray for the families who have given that ultimate sacrifice during this war and in previous ones.

We acknowledge the military service of your Chamber President, Lettie Bien, who is currently on the front line in Iraq and wish her God speed and a safe return (SOON)!

In closing, let us give "thanks" for the many blessings which have been bestowed upon us as Americans, and express gratitude for the privilege of living in this beautiful, peaceful community. May God help us to collectively and cooperatively meet future challenges with compassion, integrity, intellect, and courage.

Thank you .