



**Mayor Don Slesnick's "State of the City" Address
Presented at the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce Breakfast
On Thursday, September 21, 2006**

It is a pleasure to be with my neighbors and friends on another beautiful South Florida morning at our historic Biltmore Hotel. "Thank you" to the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce for the opportunity to share with each of you my Fifth Annual "State of the City" address. October 1st will mark the beginning of a new fiscal year full of new projects and new promise funded by a robust \$142 million dollar annual budget.

The past year was a productive one for your City, despite the record breaking hurricane season which we endured. While we all hope that this year's tropical storm season will pass uneventfully, we clearly remember that at this time last year we were picking up after Katrina, dodging Rita, and unaware of the oncoming wrath of Wilma. During these storms, the City lost approximately 2,000 trees, most of them decades-old, and collected more than 745,000 cubic yards of debris. One thousand two hundred fifty new trees have been planted, 650,000 square feet of sod has been replaced, and a Commission-appointed citizen task force has issued an in-depth report suggesting new ways to minimize utility disruption following natural and man-made disasters.

I won't detail all the many accomplishments of the year because the City's printed 2005/06 Annual Report will soon be in the mail. When you receive that document, please take time to study it. The many accomplishments listed within it are important and a result of a collaborative effort of your City Commission. Please know that each of your City Commissioners, [Vice Mayor Anderson, Commissioner Cabrera, Commissioner Kerdyk and Commissioner Withers], provides a special expertise and focus to make certain that your City, is the absolute best that it can be. Also recognize that while the City Commission sets the big picture priorities and performance expectations for these programs, it is the hard work of the administration, employees, and volunteers that turn these policies into reality. Some of the accomplishments are not totally new, but the continuation of various projects and programs represents an ongoing commitment of time and resources to deliver exceptional services to our residents and businesses. For instance, the City secured four new trolleys to assist

in the operation of that successful transportation program which now serves over 4,000 riders daily. Funded by the half-penny gas tax, Miami-Dade County has held this program up as a shining example of how those monies should be properly used.

Although Coral Gables is a safe city, it became even safer when the crime statistics released in May showed that total offenses were down by almost 15%, total non-violent crimes were down by 14% and total violent crimes were down by 27%.

New accomplishments reflect the desire to streamline government using advanced technology and automated programs to enhance efficiency, performance, and accountability while not sacrificing the personal touch of a hometown environment. We pride ourselves on being a government responsive to our citizens. This is accomplished due to our commitment to maintain and enhance the quality of life within our community. With the replacement of a 25 year old main frame with a state-of-the-art IT system to the completion of the Ponce Median, the City has become enhanced both technologically and visually.

“Quality of Life” may be an over-used and seldom defined phrase; so let’s assess its true measurements and how Coral Gables meets that definition.

We can’t enjoy a rich “quality of life” if there are worries about safety and security, so this city government continues to invest millions of dollars on top rated Fire and Police departments. We have received international recognition of our emergency vehicle extrication skills – an important performance measurement since most of our rescue calls are traffic-related. Our top rated Fire Department has enhanced its ability to serve with the purchase of a fire truck – equipped to reach 16 stories -- our high rise height limit. This is a critical addition to the fleet as our downtown grows with new commercial and residential structures. Surprisingly, it is one of only two fire departments in the State of Florida able to reach such heights via mechanical equipment.

From a law enforcement perspective, we have hired 12 new Police Officers and accelerated our recruiting in order to make certain there is a strong, exceptionally qualified police presence serving all parts of the City, “24/7.”

We can’t enjoy a rich “quality of life” if speeding commuter cars commandeer our quiet neighborhood streets. Thus, we have invested significant dollars and resources in new traffic calming devices with the use of attractive pavers and vegetation that not only divert and slow traffic but do not detract from the beauty of our neighborhoods. (This program has been so successful that it won a special “livability” recognition last year from the U.S. Conference of Mayors.)

We can’t have a rich “quality of life” for seniors if they are eventually required to move out of the City due to the lack of assisted living options which provide a safety net of onsite services. Because of a concerted effort on the part of your City government, there are now two senior communities on the drawing board – a condominium project on North Ponce and an ILF/ALF rental project on City owned property within the central commercial corridor. The City

continues to explore senior activity center possibilities to provide enhanced programming for our retirees.

We can't have a rich "quality of life" without a physically attractive community – with lush landscape, grand architecture and abundant open space. That is why your City invests significant dollars and resources in maintaining a beautiful, city-wide tree canopy. We work to preserve our open spaces, currently comprising 30 per cent of the City, and we strive, although not always successfully, to secure more. [I would point out however that the ever-present trash pits in many neighborhoods challenge our beauty, and in coming years we will work for their elimination (without a reduction of pick-up service).]

We can't enjoy a rich "quality of life" if we live amidst rampant and uncontrolled growth. That is why your City Commission has worked so hard to completely review and revamp the City's antiquated zoning code which includes new provisions that discourage the intrusion of super-sized homes in quaint neighborhoods and which establish transitional buffers to further protect our residential areas.

We can't have a rich "quality of life" without offering attractive educational choices for our children. This is why your City Commission has entered into an historic compact with the school board to make certain all public schools in Coral Gables are top performing and highly rated by 2008 and to create a new magnate high school. We are also working closely with the University of Miami. As our largest employer and largest non-government land holder, the University contributes greatly to our community's social, educational, cultural, and sporting event environment. The University of Miami also provides a positive impact on our community's financial well-being. We must work closely with the University's administration to make certain that its dynamic growth plans complement rather than conflict with the surrounding neighborhoods.

We can't have a rich "quality of life" without an array of leisure activities available to residents. Coral Gables has many year-round parks with recreational programming, golf courses and tennis complexes, a wide assortment of dining and shopping choices, and a full calendar of cultural events. Your Parks and Recreation Department is nationally recognized and is a source of citizen pride. We do face challenges every day to keep our recreational venues in top condition and we fully intend to do so including improvements to the Biltmore Golf Course and the Salvador Tennis Complex.

The business districts now have a wide assortment of shopping and dining choices. This emerging retail vitality has prompted the City to look at new parking strategies to help encourage, not discourage, patrons from utilizing these establishments. Our pay-by-cell phone program received national recognition from the U.S. Conference of Mayors, while the Miracle Mile centralized valet program (which is operated in conjunction with the Business Improvement District) has proven a huge success. The long-awaited Parking Management Study will be presented to the City Commission next month with the hope that it will help pave the way for 21st Century approaches to a long time challenge.

We will continue to provide valuable government funding to cultural groups in the City. This assistance, coupled with your personal and corporate financial support, is critical to insure quality programs of music, dance, theater and art. The Commission is also considering a new “Art in Public Places” program using developer contributions to assist in beautifying our downtown core.

A rich “quality of life” also includes a commitment to community heritage. Coral Gables is fortunate that George Merrick’s vision of his dream city remains alive, but some of the infrastructure he used to bring life to that vision is deteriorating and must be restored. That is why I will continue to advocate for public consideration of new revenue programs such as a general obligation bond to fund the important needs of our City. While the City continually strives to reduce administrative costs and increase efficiency, such savings will not fully fund the future. The only hope for Coral Gables to remain a first class City for our children and grandchildren is for us to be willing to invest in creating a sound infrastructure foundation. We must identify new funding formulas to restore historic landmarks, improve our parks, insure the retention of open space in neighborhoods, modernize our fleets, update the infrastructure and do all this while trying to keep life affordable. Perhaps therein lays our greatest challenge in the years ahead.

Other City Commission goals for coming years include:

1. apply private and public “best practices” as a way of doing business. *We need to always have a sound financial position including increased reserves and lowered retirement costs. We need to understand and embrace innovative technologies and we need to encourage a sense of urgency in our employees.*
2. ensure future infrastructure capacity for community services and livability. *We need to repair and/or modernize our infrastructure including street lighting, sewers, sidewalks, and canals and we need to ready our services for possible future annexations and an expanded population base.*
3. develop programming that further enhances the rich quality of life which we dearly enjoy. *We need to introduce more active parks for children and families, develop more vibrant senior citizen programming and introduce a tourism program that promotes the qualities Coral Gables is known for – dining, shopping, culture, history, architecture and its international business environment.*
4. maximize a safe downtown experience, setting the standard for urban living. *We need to mitigate traffic and growth while making the downtown cleaner and brighter.*

Your City government has made significant accomplishments this past year. I look forward to partnering with my fellow members of the City Commission, the City Administration, our residents and this Chamber as we push forward into the new century. Thank you, and may God bless our nation and this “City Beautiful” as we work together to face the challenges ahead.

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