

CITY OF CORAL GABLES

--MEMORANDUM--



TO: Mayor Vince Lago; Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson; Commissioner Ariel Fernandez; Commissioner Richard Lara

CC: City Manager Peter Iglesias; Deputy City Manager Joe Gomez; Assistant City Manager Carolina Vester; City Attorney Cristina M. Suárez; City Clerk Billy Urquia

FROM: Commissioner Melissa Castro

DATE: August 21, 2026

SUBJECT: Agenda Item F-5: City Manager Selection Process and National Executive Search

I am providing this memorandum to explain the policy basis for my sponsorship of Agenda Item F-5, which would initiate a formal national executive search for our next City Manager.

At the outset, I want to make one point clear: my resolution should not be interpreted as questioning Deputy City Manager Joe L. Gómez's qualifications, experience, or service to Coral Gables.

Mr. Gómez has substantial professional experience and has assumed significant responsibilities within our organization. I recognize and respect those qualifications. He should have the opportunity to participate fully in a national search, be interviewed, present his record, and receive serious consideration for the position.

The question before us is therefore not whether Mr. Gómez may be qualified.

The policy question is whether the City Commission should permanently appoint any candidate to the City's highest administrative position without first conducting a competitive process when we have sufficient time to do so.

A National Search Has Been Repeatedly Advocated

The history matters because the importance of an open and competitive process has not been raised once or in connection with only one City Manager. It has been a recurring public position throughout several leadership transitions.

February 2024: An Immediate Transition

On February 13, 2024, the Commission voted 3-2 to terminate City Manager Peter Iglesias.

With the City facing an immediate leadership transition, Assistant City Manager Alberto Parjus was appointed Acting City Manager by a unanimous 5-0 vote to ensure continuity of operations while the Commission considered permanent leadership.

During that same meeting, Commissioner Kirk Menendez proposed Ralph Cutié, then Director and CEO of the Miami-Dade Aviation Department, as a potential permanent City Manager. The Commission authorized discussions with Mr. Cutié, but he ultimately did not move forward as a candidate.

Two weeks later, on February 27, Mayor Lago sponsored **Agenda Item F-10**, co-sponsored by Vice Mayor Anderson, directing City staff to engage an executive search firm for the City Manager position.

During that meeting, Mayor Lago advocated for a national search and an open and transparent process in which qualified candidates could compete.

During the same meeting, Commissioner Ariel Fernandez nominated Amos Rojas Jr. Mr. Rojas was appointed City Manager by a 3-2 vote, with Mayor Lago and Vice Mayor Anderson opposed. The Mayor's national-search item was subsequently discussed and filed.

Mayor Lago strongly criticized the process, stating:

“This is not the right way to do things.”

He further expressed the position that someone seeking to become City Manager should **“go through a process.”**

January and February 2025: Alberto

When another leadership transition arose following Mr. Rojas's departure, the Commission again had to address who would lead the city.

The January 14 agenda included **Item H-2, “Succession plan for the City Manager's Office.”** During that meeting, Alberto Parjus was appointed City Manager through a non-agenda resolution, effective January 28, 2025.

I made the motion to appoint Mr. Parjus, and I stand by that decision.

Mayor Lago and Vice Mayor Anderson opposed his appointment and again advocated for considering a broader field of candidates. Mayor Lago publicly expressed the value of looking beyond a single candidate, stating:

“Going out and testing the waters is not a bad thing. It's a good thing.”

Mr. Parjus was appointed City Manager by a 3-2 vote without a national search.

The criticism continued after the appointment. In February 2025, WLRN reported Mayor Lago's position that Coral Gables deserved leadership that was:

“carefully vetted, not hastily chosen.”

The principle being advocated was clear: before permanently selecting the City's chief executive, the City should test the market, properly vet candidates, and conduct an appropriate process.

2025 Municipal Election: A Written Commitment

The call for a national search subsequently became more than a position expressed during Commission meetings.

It became a written campaign commitment.

In Mayor Lago's response to the **2025 Gables Good Government Committee Candidate Questionnaire**, addressing transparency and standardized procedures for selecting senior City leadership, he wrote:

“I will also pursue a national search for our next city manager, one that allows the best and the brightest to apply, to include some of our own senior staff...”

That statement is particularly relevant today.

It recognizes exactly what I am proposing: a national search does not require us to disregard qualified people already working for Coral Gables.

Mr. Gómez can be considered. He can be interviewed. He can present his experience and vision. And the Commission can determine how his qualifications compare with those of other candidates.

May 2025: Peter Iglesias Returns

Following the municipal election, Mayor Lago initiated and supported the return of Peter Iglesias as City Manager without conducting a national search.

I opposed Mr. Iglesias's reappointment.

Nevertheless, the manner in which he was reappointed is relevant to the history of this issue. After repeatedly criticizing prior City Manager appointments for proceeding without a national search, Mayor Lago supported Mr. Iglesias's return without conducting one.

Even then, however, the Mayor continued to publicly advocate for a future selection process.

During the May 20 Commission meeting, while discussing the City's longer-term leadership, Mayor Lago stated that he was **“fully supportive”** of moving forward with a formal search and said such a process should be conducted with:

“professionalism, transparency, and public input.”

That history brings us directly to the decision now before the Commission.

I Stand by My Prior Decisions; The Circumstances Today Are Different. I recognize that I supported the appointments of Amos Rojas and Alberto Parjus without first conducting a national executive search. I stand by those decisions. At the time, I publicly explained why I believed those appointments were appropriate under the circumstances.

During the January 2025 consideration of Mr. Parjus, I presented information regarding the City’s history of selecting City Managers and the advantages and disadvantages of conducting an executive search. I also discussed the City’s history of promoting or appointing qualified candidates from within the organization.

My position then was not that national searches have no value. My position was that a national search is not automatically the best course under every set of circumstances. I continue to believe that.

In 2024 and early 2025, Coral Gables was experiencing abrupt changes in its chief administrative leadership. Decisions had to be made while maintaining continuity of City operations.

Following Mr. Iglesias’s termination, Mr. Parjus immediately assumed the Acting City Manager position. The Commission explored Mr. Cutié as a potential successor, that possibility did not proceed, and the Commission continued addressing permanent leadership.

When Mr. Rojas later departed, the City faced another immediate transition. Mr. Parjus was already serving as Deputy City Manager and brought extensive municipal-government experience and institutional knowledge to the position. My support for his appointment reflected my judgment that continuity, institutional knowledge, and the City’s immediate administrative needs were particularly important at that moment.

Those were policy judgments based on the circumstances confronting the City at the time.

I do not retreat from them simply because they were politically criticized. I continue to stand behind them. But good policy also requires recognizing when the facts before us have changed. And today, they have.

Today, There Is No Need to Rush

Regardless of my opposition to Mr. Iglesias’s reappointment, the relevant fact for the decision before us today is straightforward: **the City is not facing an immediate vacancy.** Mr. Iglesias is currently serving as City Manager and is expected to remain in that position through **January 8, 2027**. The proposed appointment of Deputy City Manager Joe Gómez would likewise not become effective until January 8.

That means the Commission has more than four months from the August 25 meeting before the proposed transition would occur. There is no unexpected vacancy requiring an immediate permanent appointment. **There is no need to rush.**

We have a qualified internal candidate in Mr. Gómez, and we have sufficient time to determine what other qualified candidates may be available before making one of the most consequential appointments entrusted to this Commission.

That is the critical difference between the circumstances today and the abrupt leadership transitions of 2024 and early 2025. It also presents an opportunity. We can interview Mr. Gómez. We can evaluate his qualifications and vision for the organization. We can invite other qualified candidates to apply. We can compare experience and leadership backgrounds. And then we can make an informed decision. That does not contradict my previous support for promoting from within.

Mr. Gómez may ultimately demonstrate precisely why an internal candidate is the best choice for Coral Gables. The difference is that today we have the time to find out before making the permanent appointment.

Consistency Matters

The public record deserves to be considered in its entirety. When previous Commission majorities made direct appointments, the absence of a national search was repeatedly and publicly criticized.

- In February 2024, Mayor Lago sponsored **Item F-10** directing the City to engage an executive search firm.
- When Mr. Rojas was appointed instead, the Mayor said candidates should “**go through a process.**”
- When Mr. Parjus was appointed, the Mayor again advocated for testing the market and subsequently argued that City leadership should be “**carefully vetted, not hastily chosen.**”
- During the 2025 municipal election, he committed in writing to pursuing a national search that would allow “**the best and the brightest**” to apply, including senior City staff.
- Then, in May 2025, Mayor Lago supported Mr. Iglesias’s return without a national search. **I did not.** Yet even while supporting that appointment, the Mayor continued to publicly endorse a future process involving “**professionalism, transparency, and public input.**”

- These were not isolated statements. The importance of a national search and a competitive selection process was raised repeatedly, over multiple City Manager appointments and through a municipal election.

I understood the principle being advocated then, and I believe it deserves the same consideration now.

The standard for selecting our City's chief executive should not depend upon which Commission majority holds the votes or which candidate may be preferred at a particular moment.

Today, we have more time to conduct that process than we had during the very appointments for which the absence of a search was so strongly criticized. There is no need to choose between continuity and due diligence. We can have both.

Where We Are Today:

Agenda Item F-4 proposes appointing Deputy City Manager Joe Gómez as the next permanent City Manager, effective January 8, 2027.

My Agenda Item F-5 proposes initiating a formal national executive search.

Mr. Gómez's qualifications and a national search are not competing propositions.

Mr. Gómez has significant engineering, management, and public-sector experience. Before joining Coral Gables, he served as Public Works Director for the City of Miami Beach, leading a department of approximately 360 employees across four divisions with a combined capital and operating budget of approximately \$600 million. He also has decades of engineering experience in the public and private sectors.

Those are meaningful qualifications, and I do not discount them.

A national search does not diminish Mr. Gómez. It gives the Commission an opportunity to conduct additional due diligence.

Mr. Gómez can present his qualifications, experience, and vision for Coral Gables. Other qualified candidates can do the same. The Commission can interview them, compare their experience, and determine who is best suited to lead the organization.

If Mr. Gómez ultimately emerges as the strongest candidate, the process will have confirmed that conclusion.

Conclusion:

The issue before us is not simply **who** should become our next City Manager. It is also **how we make that decision under the circumstances that exist today.**

I stand by the decisions I made during the leadership transitions of 2024 and early 2025. I also stand by my opposition to the reappointment of Peter Iglesias in 2025.

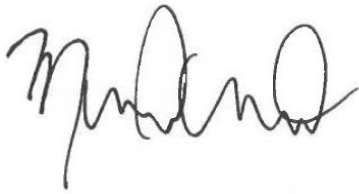
Those positions are not inconsistent with the decision before us today. They reflect the circumstances that existed at the time and my responsibility to exercise independent judgment as those circumstances change.

Today, there is no immediate vacancy. We have a qualified internal candidate, and we have months before the proposed transition would occur. There is sufficient time to conduct a competitive process without creating a gap in City leadership.

Given that history, the public commitments that have been made, and the time now available to us, **it is my hope that the Commission will give the national-search proposal full and thoughtful consideration at the duly noticed public meeting.**

Whatever the Commission ultimately decides, residents should have confidence that we used the time available to us, considered our options carefully, and made an informed decision about the future leadership of Coral Gables.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Melissa Castro', with a stylized, cursive script.

Commissioner Melissa Castro
Office of the City Commission