


CITY OF CORAL GABLES

--MEMORANDUM--



TO: Iliana Lavastida, *Executive Director, Diario Las Americas*

FROM: Vince Lago, *Mayor* 

DATE: April 3, 2026

SUBJECT: Letter to Diario Las Americas Executive Director Iliana Lavastida

This memorandum is intended to provide clarity regarding recent media coverage of the City's upcoming April 21, 2026, referendums and to formally share the correspondence sent to the Executive Director of Diario Las Americas, Ms. Iliana Lavastida.

A copy of the full letter and its attachments are included below for reference.

Letter to Ms. Iliana Lavastida, Executive Director, Diario Las Americas

Dear Ms. Lavastida,

Recently, my office received notice of an article published by Diario Las Americas, copied herein, covering the upcoming April 21st referendums in Coral Gables. I appreciate the attention your publication has given to these important issues, which I believe will have a lasting impact on our residents and the future governance of our City. However, I must respectfully express my disappointment with the sourcing of the article.

By having only interviewed Commissioner Ariel Fernandez, the article relies heavily on his perspective. Commissioner Fernandez's views on our upcoming referendums are well known, and, in many respects, they represent a minority position on the Commission. The absence of outreach to my office offers an incomplete presentation of these issues. Had our perspectives been included, your article could have provided readers with a more balanced view of the intent of these referendums.

Additionally, I am concerned that certain statements made by Commissioner Fernandez in this article are irrelevant, call into question the integrity of our electoral system and serve to confuse residents about known facts.

Comment on Real Estate Growth in Coral Gables

- Commissioner Fernandez’s suggestion that the election date reform would impact control over real estate growth is speculative and is not specific to any of the proposed referendums. None of the proposed amendments alter zoning or development authority. This concern is unrelated to the measures before voters, and it seeks to confuse residents about what is truly at stake.

Comment on USPS Security Concerns

- Commissioner Fernandez’s assertion that vote-by-mail ballots are unreliable is irresponsible. His statement that the USPS postal system “...es algo que no se puede monitorear... [y que no se sabe con certeza] quién vota ni cuál es el sistema exacto que se utiliza/it is something that cannot be monitored...[and that it is not known with certainty] who votes or what is the exact system that is used,” is incorrect and risks undermining public confidence in a process that is governed by strict legal safeguards and administered with transparency.
- Miami Dade County Supervisor of Elections Alina Garcia has repeatedly addressed the legality and security of voting by mail, including once in this article. Directly countering her statements with Commissioner Fernandez’s inaccuracies contradicts this reality, undermines our democracy, and degrades her office’s hard work in this regard. Residents deserve to feel assured that their votes are secure and that our institutions are functioning as intended.

Comments on Ballot Question No. 6: Requiring a vote of the electors prior to changing the compensation of City elected officials

- Commissioner Fernandez omits a crucial piece of information in the article. In 2024, Commissioner Fernandez and Commissioner Castro brazenly gave themselves a 101% pay raise in a manner obscured from the Commission and our City’s residents. This ballot question was implemented because of this misuse of power and it seeks to prevent this from occurring in the future. Please see the exhibits (3) included with this letter, they

Comments on Ballot Question No. 5: Authorizing a contracted inspector general as needed for the City of Coral Gables

- The authorization of a contracted Inspector General reflects the City’s commitment to oversight and the prevention of fraud or mismanagement. Commissioner Fernandez states that “[la] oficina de Inspector General les costaría a los residentes entre quinientos mil y un millón de dólares anuales.../[the] Inspector General's office would cost residents between \$500,000 and \$1 million annually...” It is important to note that the total costs associated with a contracted Inspector General’s office are unknown, and thus this statement is inaccurate.

I respectfully encourage your publication to continue covering our upcoming elections while ensuring that a diversity of perspectives is represented. My office remains available at any time to provide additional clarification on matters affecting our City.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Vince Lago
Mayor of Coral Gables

Attachments:

- Diario Las Americas Article: Coral Gables Mail-In Ballot Election, March 29, 2026
- Coral Gables Magazine Article, November 8, 2023

CC:

Nelson J. Mezerhane; Diario Las Americas; nmezerhane@diariolasamericas.com
Daniel Castropé, Diario Las Americas; dcastrope@diariolasamericas.com
Alina Garcia, Miami-Dade County Supervisor of Elections; Alina.Garcia@votemiamidade.gov
Peter Iglesias, City Manager, City of Coral Gables; piglesias@coralgables.com
Cristina Suarez, City Attorney, City of Coral Gables; csuarez@coralgables.com
Billy Urquia, City Clerk, City of Coral Gables; burquia@coralgables.com
Rhonda Anderson, Vice Mayor, City of Coral Gables; randerson@coralgables.com
Richard Lara, Commissioner, City of Coral Gables; rlara@coralgables.com
Ariel Fernandez, Commissioner, City of Coral Gables; afernandez3@coralgables.com
Melissa Castro, Commissioner, City of Coral Gables; mcastro@coralgables.com
Miami Herald
Coral Gables Magazine



CITY OF CORAL GABLES

MAYOR
VINCE LAGO

April 3, 2026

Ms. Iliana Lavastida
Diario Las Americas
2150 Coral Way, 1st Floor
Miami, FL 33145

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- Coral Gables Magazine Article: Commissioner Salary Increases, November 8, 2023

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Miami Herald

Coral Gables Magazine

ELECTIONS

Coral Gables replaces ballot boxes with snail mail to decide political future

The residents of the 'Ciudad Bonita' will determine through a postal referendum eight reforms that would alter the electoral calendar, the municipal ethical oversight and the voting system



The City Council of Coral Gables. JESÚS HERNÁNDEZ / DLA

By Daniel Castropé
March 29, 2026 - 16:31



MIAMI. - The 37,332 registered voters in the city of Coral Gables are preparing for a historic election day that dispenses with physical voting centers to make way for a referendum exclusively by the postal system.

This special call comes after a political crisis that erupted in May 2025, when the Municipal Commission tried to modify the election dates without the direct consent of citizens at the polls.

The popular consultation votes on eight fundamental amendments to the Constitutional Charter that range from the definitive change of the electoral cycle to the creation of an office of the Inspector General and the elimination of second rounds.

The process constitutes a legal rectification mechanism after a ruling by the Florida Third District Court of Appeals that invalidated similar maneuvers in neighboring municipalities such as Miami on the grounds that any alteration in the length of the terms of office of officials requires mandatory voter validation.

Tradition and efficiency

Miami-Dade Supervisor of Elections Alina Garcia defended the legality and convenience of this format that breaks with the centuries-old tradition of physical ballot boxes in this municipality.

The official explained that this decision responds to strictly administrative and budgetary criteria that favor the municipal coffers. "The City of Coral Gables decided to do the election by mail because it is much cheaper; it comes out at about half the usual cost," said García when justifying the logistical shift implemented by the city council.

The electoral supervisor clarified that Florida's legal framework protects this modality under very specific conditions. "By law, elections can be held by mail, as long as there are no elected officials on the ballot; in this case they are only questions about how to govern in the city of Coral Gables," he said.

García emphasized that the success of this transition depends exclusively on citizen mobilization and the commitment of residents to public affairs. "What we need is for the people of Coral Gables to participate to hear what they want and how they want the city to move forward," said the official in order to encourage citizen participation.

The logistics for this day do not contemplate the deployment of personnel in regular polling stations. "There is no polling station open, there will be no early voting or election on election day in person," García warned. However, the central office in Doral will function as the only point of reception for those who distrust the postal system or need assistance with lost ballots.

Political fracture

Despite the technical arguments about savings, the call does not have the support of all members of the local government. Commissioner Ariel Fernández positioned himself as the main opponent of this modality.

Fernández expressed disagreement with the structure of the consultation. "I did not vote in favor of making this election in this way; My suggestion was always to present these amendments in an election that already existed, whether it was the one in August, November or the municipal election in April of next year," said the legislator.

According to the commissioner, the speed of the special referendum responds to a strategy to consolidate changes before the **political** balance of the City turns towards greater oversight.

Fernández's main concern is that the transfer of the municipal elections to the national cycle in November will dilute the attention of residents on the problems closest to them.

"Moving the elections takes away a little power from residents over important municipal issues and gives more importance to national issues that have nothing to do with the municipality," Fernández argued.

The commissioner linked this reform to a possible loss of control over the city's real estate growth.

Fernández also questioned the lack of direct supervision in the postal system, assuring that "it is something that cannot be monitored," because, he considers, it is not known with certainty "who votes or what is the exact system that is used."

Reform package

The April 21 referendum not only seeks to align the local calendar with the national one, but also proposes a profound review of the fiscal discipline and ethical responsibility of the municipal government.

The First Amendment proposes the definitive change from the general elections of April in odd years to November in even years. This proposal has the support of Mayor Vince Lago and Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson, who maintain that citizen participation in November is usually three times higher than in April.

The City registered a turnout of just 29% in April 2025 compared to the 83% that went to the polls in the national cycle of November 2024. The defenders of change claim that a greater mass of voters gives a democratic legitimacy that the municipal system does not possess today.

The sixth amendment addresses an issue of high public sensitivity given that it proposes that any change in the compensation of elected officials must be mandatorily approved by voters in a referendum.

This measure seeks to prevent the Commission from using its legislative power to self-allocate salary increases without the consent of taxpayers.

Commissioner Fernández was favorable to this specific point, considering that it is a power that residents should have, although he maintained his criticism about the general context of the ballot.

The reform also proposes the formal creation of a Charter Review Committee every decade. This measure ensures the validity of municipal regulations on a scheduled basis and prevents structural changes from depending on unforeseen political tensions.

Inspection and shielding

The fifth proposal of the ballot authorizes the hiring of Inspector General services to audit and investigate municipal management, with the aim of preventing fraud and abuse of power.

This figure has been the subject of controversy due to its impact on the local budget. "The Inspector General's office would cost residents between \$500,000 and \$1 million annually, which, in Fernandez's view, is an unnecessary expense."

However, the promoters of the amendment say that independent supervision would generate long-term savings since it identifies redundancies and mismanagement in municipal departments. The City would have the flexibility to contract these services with Miami-Dade County or a private firm.

In parallel, the Eighth Amendment seeks to elevate the economic stability of Coral Gables to constitutional status through rigid reservation policy. The proposal calls for the general fund to maintain at least 25% of the annual expenditure budget. Any attempt to reduce this percentage would require a 'supermajority' vote, of four of the five members of the Commission.

Plurality and spoiler effect

The Seventh Amendment represents one of the most profound changes in the mechanics of local power due to the eventual elimination of runoff elections. Under the current system, if no candidate exceeds 50% of the votes, the two most voted must face each other in a second round.

The new plurality system would immediately declare the winner whoever obtains the highest number of votes in the general election.

Critics of this measure warn of the risk that a candidate with minority support will win an election if the majority vote is divided among several similar options. This scenario known as the 'spoiler effect' is one of the biggest concerns of those who see in the second round a guarantee of consensus.

On the contrary, the defenders of plurality argue that the second rounds in Coral Gables usually register a tiny turnout that distorts the supposed legitimacy of the majority.

The operational savings of eliminating this second electoral event is estimated at \$125,000 for each cycle.

Safeguarding the vote

The integrity of this special election depends on the "strict adherence to instructions" with which citizens complete their mail-in ballots. The Department of Elections began mass mailing of ballots on March 20 and set March 23 as the deadline for new voter registrations.

Supervisor Garcia recalled that the signature verification process is the main filter to guarantee the authenticity of the vote. Voters must sign inside the red envelope box and ensure that their signature matches the official records of the electoral office. Florida law grants a grace period for the "cure" of deficient signatures until April 23 at five in the afternoon.

This curation mechanism allows citizens to correct technical errors such as a missing signature or a signature that does not match the database after receiving an official notification.

The election official urged residents not to wait until the last minute to return their envelopes because the ballot must be physically at the elections office by 7:00 p.m. on April 21.

The success of this voting model will define the course of the 'Beautiful City' in the face of the challenges of government modernization. The outcome of the eight proposals could determine whether the municipality achieves a consensus for its institutional strengthening.

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CORAL GABLES

MAGAZINE



CITY HALL STREETWISE

RaiseGate: How 3 Commissioners Gave Themselves a 101% Raise

📅 November 8, 2023 👤 Kylie Wang

On September 13, the Coral Gables City Commission was scheduled for a long day. First, they'd have their regular Commission meeting — which usually last upwards of seven hours, sometimes into the

evening — and then, at 3 pm, they'd have their First Budget Hearing.

In the draft of the budget that was published online, which is 478 pages, there was no mention of anything involving commission raises. And yet, an item on commission raises was there, added at the last minute. It takes three members of the Commission to add an item to the budget, making it likely that Commissioners Kirk Menendez, Ariel Fernandez, and Melissa Castro — the three who voted in favor of the raise — were those who did so.

In the wake of this, rumors swirled and various numbers were thrown out by different outlets. Now, with two other Commission meetings having taken place, as well as the Second Budget Hearing, we have all — or at least most — of the facts.

It's important to note first that the mayor, vice mayor, and the three commissioners all make slightly different salaries, including expense allowances (which they do not have to show receipts for). These original amounts before the raise are laid out in chart one below.

CHART ONE: COMMISSION MEMBERS' SALARIES PRE-RAISE				
	YEARLY SALARY	EXPENSE ALLOWANCE	CAR ALLOWANCE	TOTAL (WITH ALLOWANCES)
COMMISSIONERS	\$36,488	\$4,800	\$0	\$41,288
VICE MAYOR	\$39,285	\$4,800	\$0	\$44,085
MAYOR	\$44,905	\$6,000	\$0	\$50,905

Three options for raises were initially proposed. Option 1 was the most modest, with an increase in salary alone and no extra money devoted to expense allowances (which would stay the same) or car allowances. Under this option, the three commissioners would get a yearly raise of 42.51 percent to a proposed \$52,000 per year. The mayor and vice mayor would receive smaller raises, putting their salaries just above their colleagues.

Option 2 allowed for the same salary increases as in Option 1 but also included a car allowance of \$6,497 and an increase of \$2,400 in expense allowances, giving the three commissioners a 59.12 percent total raise to \$65,697.

Option 3 was the most lucrative, and the one adopted (see chart two below). The three commissioners will receive a 101.14 percent raise overall, including \$9,600 in expense allowances and \$8,446 in car allowances. Reportedly, all three commissioners have already bought new luxury cars.

CHART TWO: COMMISSION MEMBERS' ADOPTED SALARY RAISES

SALARY ONLY	PRE-RAISE	PROPOSED	INCREASE	PERCENT INCREASE
COMMISSIONERS	\$36,488	\$65,000	\$28,512	78.14%
VICE MAYOR	\$39,285	\$67,000	\$27,715	70.55%
MAYOR	\$44,905	\$69,000	\$24,095	53.66%
EXPENSE ALLOWANCE	PRE-RAISE	PROPOSED	INCREASE	PERCENT INCREASE
COMMISSIONERS	\$4,800	\$9,600	\$4,800	100%
VICE MAYOR	\$4,800	\$9,600	\$4,800	100%
MAYOR	\$6,000	\$9,600	\$3,600	60%
CAR ALLOWANCE	PRE-RAISE	PROPOSED	INCREASE	PERCENT INCREASE
COMMISSIONERS	\$0	\$8,446	\$8,446	N/A
VICE MAYOR	\$0	\$8,446	\$8,446	N/A
MAYOR	\$0	\$8,446	\$8,446	N/A
TOTAL INCREASES	PRE-RAISE	PROPOSED	INCREASE	PERCENT INCREASE
COMMISSIONERS	\$41,288	\$83,046	\$41,758	101.14%
VICE MAYOR	\$44,085	\$85,046	\$40,961	92.91%
MAYOR	\$50,905	\$87,046	\$36,141	71%

In the following commission meeting on Sept. 26, Vice Mayor Anderson sponsored an item on the agenda to reduce the proposed salary increases. “My point is the process was not done right,” the vice mayor said. “It wasn’t in a draft budget. It wasn’t done by ordinance. There was no discussion item on it.”

She went on to say that she had been approached by residents both in-person and via email who were “really upset” about the way the situation had been handled. In an interview with *Coral Gables*

Magazine, she confirmed that the issue she had was not necessarily with the raises themselves, but with the way the process was handled without resident input, which she called “a deceptive tactic.”

**“MY POINT IS THE PROCESS WAS NOT DONE RIGHT.
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VICE MAYOR RHONDA ANDERSON

Fernandez, meanwhile, argued that he had received only two emails against the issue and “numerous” phone calls advocating either for the raise or for making the Commissioner role a full-time position with an appropriate corresponding salary. In a Coral Gables Neighbors Association (CGNA) email that was sent out on Oct. 1, the organization further stated that “the commissioners’ voicemail boxes [were] jammed with abusive messages.” The facts do not bear that out, however.

Jessica Keller, a former city employee with the Public Works Department and current resident of Coral Gables, refutes that statement. “I made a public records request and I saw that that was not accurate,” she told *Coral Gables Magazine*. Her search included any e-mails sent to Menendez, Fernandez, or Castro that included the words “raise” or “compensation.” She found only four e-mails in support of the raises and 33 against: 14 to Fernandez, 10 to Castro, and nine to Menendez. Of the 33 that advocated against the raise, she found less than a third that could be considered “abusive” or rude.

In the end, the Commission voted 3-2 on Sept. 26 to move forward with the 101.14 percent raise. But the issue wasn’t finished with yet. In the two weeks before the next commission meeting, Mayor Lago took to Spanish-language radio and TV to expound upon his colleagues’ deficiencies. He called the three commissioners “unprepared to do the job,” said they “put their hands down the pockets of residents,” and accused Menendez and Fernandez of “living off their wives,” all in Spanish.



Mayor Vince Lago went on Spanish-language station America TeVe to discuss his colleagues after the three commissioners gave themselves “exorbitant compensation agreements,” according to his Instagram account.

In response, Menendez formally censured the mayor during the Oct. 10 meeting with the support of Fernandez and Castro, a move that will likely have no real repercussions but does speak to the deepening divide on the dais.

Also during that Oct. 10 meeting, Anderson and Lago requested that they be allowed to amend the city code to adjust their compensation and expense allowances back to the pre-raise amounts and to eliminate both of their car allowances, effectively returning the money to the city. Fernandez responded with a prepared statement that accused his two colleagues of attempting to “limit the number of people who can potentially run against them in our next election,” though the logic behind this declaration was not given.

Fernandez then went on to accuse the mayor of using “henchmen” to bully members of the media, and of committing crimes in the mayor’s personal business dealings as a real estate consultant. He further claimed that the mayor made derogatory comments about women at a recent city event. He did not provide any evidence for these claims.

All three commissioners voted against allowing Lago and Anderson to adjust their compensations, effectively forcing them to accept the money and then donate it back to the city. This will ensure that the money is double-taxed and, by the time it makes it back to the city, will be diminished. No reasoning for this was given, but the point was clear. “It’s flawed for the same reason that the raises were flawed” was Anderson’s only comment.

Fernandez’s notoriety largely comes from his previous position running the *Gables Insider* blog, which he sold after taking office. In an article published on Oct. 6, 2022, long before Fernandez became a city commissioner, he criticized the executive benefits package given — without Commission consent — to senior level employees. The article, entitled “Raises, Executive Benefits & More: Senior Staff Compensation Rises at Taxpayer Expense,” states, “The attractive points of government work are job security and a pension that provides a stipend...” When asked to provide a comment on the issue, he did not respond.

Castro and Menendez have had comparably little to say on the matter in public, although Castro has been more vocal in her support than Menendez, who has been uncharacteristically quiet over the last few commission meetings. He has been the subject of rumors accusing him of trading his vote to change the date of city elections — which he reversed — to get the raise because he’s currently facing financial challenges.

“NOBODY CAN REALLY STEP INTO THIS ROLE UNLESS YOU HAVE YOUR OWN PRACTICE [AS AN ATTORNEY], OR YOU HAVE YOUR OWN COMPANY, OR YOU’RE RETIRED. SOME RESIDENTS SAY IT’S STILL NOT HIGH ENOUGH.”

COMMISSIONER KIRK MENENDEZ

In an interview with *Coral Gables Magazine*, Menendez said that these rumors were totally false, and that he voted in favor of the wage raise because it would allow someone earning a low salary to become a city commissioner.

“Nobody can really step into this role unless you have your own practice [as an attorney], or you have your own company, or you’re retired,” he said. “Some residents say it’s still not high enough.... We

bumped it up to 65, 67, and 69 thousand dollars [so that a] person can do this, and not be trapped in a situation where they could get fired from their job for missing time.” Menendez said the benchmark they used for the raise was what a senior administration assistant would make.

RELATED: Elections Brouhaha Ends, Status Quo Stays

To be fair, several other cities in Miami-Dade compensate their elected officials more handsomely than Coral Gables did previously. According to Salary.com, the average compensation for city commissioners in Miami-Dade is \$55,230. This ranges from the \$1 per year that city councilmembers take in Key Biscayne, to the \$138,000 that county commissioners make (they voted last year 7-5 to more than double their yearly compensation from \$60,000.) And Coral Gables’ compensation for elected officials had not changed in 40 years.

In the end, says Vice Mayor Anderson, it was the method — not the amount — that was troublesome. When asked if she was surprised by Menendez’s vote on the raise, Anderson responded, “No, I was not surprised by it... I’m surprised by the manner in which he chose to do it.”

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