

CITY OF CORAL GABLES

--MEMORANDUM--



The City Beautiful

TO: Honorable Mayor and Commissioners

CC: City Manager's Office, Assistant Director for Planning & Zoning, City Clerk, City Attorney's Office and City Clerk

FROM: Vice Mayor Rhonda Anderson

DATE: December 9th, 2024

SUBJECT: Background re: Proposed Revisions to the Mediterranean Design Code and Resolution re: Planning and Zoning Board Conceptual Review Process

Before Mayor Dorothy Thomson was elected as a commissioner and the first female Mayor, two modern buildings with glass curtain walls were constructed in the Central Business District on Alhambra Circle in the 1970s. The glass façades clashed with the architecture that George Merrick envisioned for the City Beautiful. These glass clad buildings were nicknamed "Flash Cubes" – a metaphor alluding to the manner in which the sun reflected on the glass at a time when instamatic cameras used rotating flash cubes to illuminate a subject being photographed.

Glass buildings became popular because they were faster and less expensive to build than masonry structures. They were also much less expensive to build than Mediterranean Revival Style built with quality materials and stone. Glass is relatively cheap and with modern framing techniques available in the 1970s, it was much faster to build a structure with an exterior glass facade.

To encourage developers to spend more money on quality materials and architectural styles that are compatible with Coral Gables' Mediterranean Revival architecture, Mayor Thomson and her Commission developed the Mediterranean Design requirements that provided bonuses for designing buildings in that style. The bonuses helped offset the increased costs of constructing Mediterranean Revival style buildings. The design requirements were a monumental step to preserve the character of Coral Gables in the City Beautiful movement that incorporated Mediterranean Revival style architecture to increase the beauty, property values and walkability of the City.

Sometime in the mid-2000's -- long before any member of this Commission began serving, including our longest serving member, Mayor Lago, -- a prior Commission inserted language into the Mediterranean Design Code that allowed "other architectural

styles” to receive bonuses. This change dramatically altered the original purpose of the code and resulted in some of the buildings that residents do not believe should have received bonuses, such as the Zubi building that is commonly known as the “building with the birds.”

2021 – The Blue-Ribbon Committee:

Shortly after I was elected in 2021, I issued a memo expressing my initial goals to improve the zoning code. In 2021, the first steps were taken by appointing a Blue-Ribbon Committee to provide recommendations and a moratorium was placed on applications in the pipeline seeking Mediterranean Bonuses while the Blue-Ribbon Committee met.

Because development moratoriums can only be done on a limited basis for a few months while major Code revisions are being drafted, two of the key recommendations that the Blue-Ribbon Committee made that did not require extensive hearings and comment periods were immediately proposed and passed. Those revisions:

- (1) removed the ability to seek bonuses for “other architectural styles” (i.e., the Zubi building), and
- (2) provided a non-mandatory process for applicants seeking a Med Bonus to submit preliminary plans for conceptual review.

During the conceptual review process, applicants can receive non-binding comments from the Board of Architects regarding whether the design appears to be heading in the right direction to earn a Mediterranean Design bonus.

2022-2024 – Discussions and Proposed Changes:

The next steps led to the draft ordinance that will be heard on first reading at the December 10, 2024 City Commission meeting. Those steps included:

(1) ICAA Florida Chapter Lecture Series on Mediterranean Architecture at the Coral Gables Museum - October 26, 2022 – May 2023:

The Lecture Series addressed key components and examples of quality Mediterranean Revival design. Professor Teofilo Victoria and other highly respected Classical Architects examined the status and quality of the post-Merrick Mediterranean Revival Architecture that has been built.

The speakers at Lecture Series critiqued some of the more recent Mediterranean Revival style buildings constructed and noted that the architecture appeared to be a “wallpaper” of Mediterranean Revival Architecture. More specifically, it was noted that the buildings failed to include sufficient depth in the bases, window and door openings and appropriate fenestration that give Mediterranean Revival Architecture a timeless appeal that the buildings Merrick and his team designed. Many of the comments received mirrored what the Blue-Ribbon Committee noted.

During a discussion item at the **June 13, 2023** Commission meeting, I provided a recap of the key findings of the Lecture Series.

Unfortunately, Professor Teofilo, who put an enormous amount of effort in organizing the Lecture Series and reviewed the early first drafts of the proposed edits to the Mediterranean Design Code, passed away before the proposed text revisions were completed.

- (2) **Initial Drafting Phase - June through September 2023:** Staff and interested participants poured over the Blue-Ribbon Committee’s recommendations, prior draft staff edit and comments, and new comments from interested parties. Notably, some elements that provided “points” to qualify for the Mediterranean Bonus, but did not enhance the Mediterranean look or feel of a building, were removed from the list of qualifying items and reclassified as a pre-requisite for all projects. During this process, it was suggested that the Board of Architects should “test drive” the draft amendments and provide comments before the revisions were sent to the Planning and Zoning Board for their consideration. This interim step has never been done with prior zoning code revisions.
- (3) **Board of Architects (BOA) – Five Meetings between Oct. 2023 and Sept. 2024:**¹ BOA held three (3) meetings between October 5 and November 9, 2023, discussing and providing additional language and revisions. At the fourth meeting May 30, 2023, the BOA further discussed additional buildings proposed as architectural precedents and character-defining features. At the fifth meeting on September 5, 2024, BOA considered additional buildings that were offered as precedents at the Planning and Zoning Board.
- (4) **Planning and Zoning Board (PZB) - Eight Meetings between April and Oct. 2024:**² During the seven (7) month period, the PZB discussed proposed revisions and at a final vote in October 2024, voted in favor of the proposed changes. PZB discussed and decided to address their concerns regarding the underlying zoning of projects at a separate meeting in the future. Based upon my prior work with our City Attorney’s Office to address the underlying zoning issues without converting the zoning to an “as of right” project, I have proposed a separate resolution providing the PZB some direction to examine the feasibility of addressing the underlying zoning through the non-binding conceptual review process so the Commission and the PZB will continue to retain authority to review the actual site plans in the future.

¹ October 5, October 19 and November 9, 2023, and May 30 and September 5, 2024.

² April 10, May 8, June 12, July 10, August 14, September 11, September 26 and October 29, 2024