



# Coral Gables news

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## Mayor Don Slesnick our choice for re-election

### AN EDITORIAL

**I**n just a few days, voters will have the opportunity to choose from three candidates for Mayor of Coral Gables.

The incumbent, Mayor Don Slesnick, an attorney/mediator by profession and Coral Gables resident since 1972, was first elected in 2001 and is now seeking his fifth and final term allowable under the term-limits ordinance.

The challengers, both seeking elected office for the first time, are James Cason, a retired diplomat who has resided in Coral Gables since 2008, and Tom Korge, a business attorney and former chair of Coral Gables' Pension Board, who has resided in the Gables since 1990.

With no record of past accomplishments as elected leaders, both Cason and Korge have formed their campaigns largely around negative critiques of the current administration, primarily in the area of financial matters. The primary talking points involve: lowering property taxes, fixing the employee pension system, and ensuring better financial management of the city's public-private partnership at the Biltmore Hotel.

### PROPERTY TAXES

Let us look first at the issue of property tax rates. During the course the past decade, with Mayor Slesnick in office, we have seen property taxes go up and go down, but since 2001 have only increased by around two tenths of a mill (from 5.841 to 6.072). Currently, rates are lower than they were four years ago.

On a comparative basis, among the 35 municipalities in Miami-Dade County, Coral Gables residents enjoy the 26th lowest combined millage rate on property taxes.

Paying taxes always hurts, but relative to other communities in South Florida, Coral Gables residents pay a well-below-average tax rate while living in a beautiful, historic community with service levels and amenities that would be a substantial upgrade for nearly every other of our neighboring communities.

The reality is, if you believe that you are paying substantial taxes in Coral Gables, it is probably because your house is worth more, in great part due to the city's ambiance and service level.

### CITY EMPLOYEE PENSIONS

The issue of employee pensions has been a hot topic in recent media coverage, but it is not a new issue and it is not one that can or should be solved with the stroke of a pen. Fixing pension problems that were set into motion seven decades ago (1939) is a very emotional and difficult process for everyone involved.

Grandstanding or sounding as though the issue could be solved in a "tough guy" fashion only will hurt the process, and could result in the kind of ugly, divisive upheaval that we're seeing in other U.S. communities. That is not what we want for Coral Gables.

This publication credits Mayor Slesnick for first raising the looming pension issue many years ago, before it was viewed broadly and accepted as a source of concern for state and local governments. He advocated for cooperative change at a time when the urgency of these issues was not so apparent to all parties.

During the mayor's term, not one new pension benefit has been added; rather everything that has been done by the city commission has lowered the projected costs of the retirement system. During the past five years, the city reached agreements with its employee unions to institute 5 percent employee contributions.

Last fall major changes were made to the general employee's plan, changes which are now being challenged and litigated. The mayor voted "no" on that proposal and supported one that would have been accepted by the employees.

### PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Consider the issue of ensuring better financial management of the city's public-private partnerships, which arose related to the lease agreement that the city has with the operators/managers of the city-owned Biltmore Hotel. Specifically, the tenant operator has failed to make rental payments and the city has come under fire for poor oversight and enforcement of the agreement.

What is not clear is whether there was any real opportunity to enforce or collect on this rent money from a struggling tenant in a severe recession. While it may be tempting for some to argue for vigorous enforcement of the lease agreement, the reality is that the Biltmore property is a financially demanding historic structure, and the hotel/tourism industry has seen severe disruptions during the first decade of the 21st Century.

Thus, the situation is far from a typical business arrangement and the city has not been presented with any realistic alternative options. The key to getting this public-private partnership back on track will be to stop the blame game and focus on developing a fair agreement that takes into account the unique requirements of this landmark, and which assigns financial responsibilities in a way that is reasonable and equitable. The city and the tenant are in the process of negotiations at this time.

### FINANCIAL STABILITY

The bottom line is that today, even after a period marked by a severe global recession, the City of

Coral Gables remains one of the best run and most livable cities in South Florida. Despite the externally driven financial challenges of the past several years, the city can boast of great economic indicators:

- A general fund reserve of \$6.5 million (up 40 percent in the past year);
- Mar. 16 Standard & Poor's rating of "AA" for current debt with the assessment that the city shows "very strong to extremely strong economic indicators despite weakness in the property tax base..."; and
- A gain in the invested assets of the pension plan of \$50 million in just a little over a year's time (14 months).

When Mayor Slesnick first took office in 2001, we learned that his accessible working style and commitment to openness and dialogue, which had worked so well in his many community volunteer roles, also produced results at City Hall.

Skeptics' questions began to be answered in the early days of his first term when Mayor Slesnick formed a citizen's panel to evaluate the controversial the City Hall Annex and the closure of Biltmore Way. The panel proved effective. Its recommendations won acceptance throughout the community.

The city was able to move decisively to terminate the construction project, permanently re-open the street, and implement an alternate plan to accommodate City Hall expansion needs through the less-costly acquisition of nearby properties.

Since that time, Mayor Slesnick earned broad public support, resulting in two unopposed re-elections and a solid victory in a three-way race four years ago. During the life of his administration, the Coral Gables Commission also entered a period of progress with effective collaboration on important issues including the introduction of a building code with enforceable regulations that prohibit construction of "McMansions" and strong measures to provide buffers between commercial and residential areas.

Along the way, important initiatives have been led by Mayor Slesnick, while others were led by fellow commissioners, further reflecting the collaborative environment that he has worked to create at City Hall. Citizens can be proud of the civil, respectful way in which their government operates.

The wide range of factors and economic realities affecting Coral Gables and local communities everywhere, suggests that it will be especially important to be able to develop consensus, move fast, and act decisively during the next few years.

We hope you have found our endorsement of Mayor Don Slesnick helpful in deciding how to cast your vote. In any case, we encourage you to participate in shaping our community's future by voting on Apr. 12.