

## Garcia, Cynthia

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**From:** Deborah Swain <dswain@milianswain.com>  
**Sent:** Monday, December 9, 2019 4:18 PM  
**To:** Valdes-Fauli, Raul; Lago, Vincente; 'Jorge Fors Jr.'; Keon, Patricia; Mena, Michael; Iglesias, Peter; Ramos, Miriam; Santamaria, Eduardo; Keller, Jessica  
**Cc:** City Clerk  
**Subject:** Responses to statement made by Alhambra Circle Resident  
**Attachments:** Swain response to Alhambra Circle Resident Letter.pdf

**CAUTION:** External email. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Dear Mr. Mayor, Mr. Vice Mayor, and Commissioners:

The attached is my comments to the letter sent to you by an Alhambra Circle resident to object to the City's plan to construct bicycle lanes on Alhambra Circle south of Coral Way.

My comments (in red) are not an attempt to make an exhaustive response to the statements in her letter, but to only address those most inaccurate statements about which I have knowledge.

I also want to take a moment to point out that the organization to which she refers as a "special interest bicycle group", Bike Walk Coral Gables (of which I was a founding member), has as its only interest to provide safety for people who try to maneuver the city streets by foot or by bicycle. The use of the term "special interest" implies that there is some personal benefit or profit gained by the unpaid volunteer members, when in fact their only interest is to increase safety in the City beautiful.

Thank you,  
Debbie Swain

**Shown below on Sunday Dec 8 at 3pm, thankfully not on a bicycle, however I did have to maneuver across the street when the sidewalk ran out.**



Comments in red added by Debbie Swain as responses to the statements in this letter

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December 6, 2019

City of Coral Gables  
Via Electronic Mail and Hard Copy

**Re: Proposed Alhambra Circle Bicycle Path**

Dear Mayor Raul Valdes Fauli  
Vice Mayor Vicente Lago  
Commissioner Jorge Fors  
Commissioner Patricia Keon  
Commissioner Michael Mena  
City Manager Peter Iglesias  
City Attorney Miriam Ramos  
Assistant City Manager Eduardo Santamaria  
Assistant Public Works Director Jessica Keller  
City Clerk Billy Urquia:

My husband and I have lived in Coral Gables for over fifty (50) years. We both grew up in North Gables and have lived at 3516 Alhambra Circle since 1996. We attended school in the Gables, rode our bikes under the beautiful tree canopies that symbolize our "City Beautiful," participated in team sports at the Youth Center, played tennis at Salvador Park, got married at the Church of the Little Flower and decided to raise our children in the same neighborhood. We love our city and cherish its historic ambiance and lush landscape that makes it so unique within Miami-Dade County.

During this time we have always relied on our elected officials to protect the historic nature and beauty of our city while respecting residents' concerns. Indeed, as we personally witnessed the city expand, we were pleased with our elected officials' commitment to preserve our founder's, George Merrick, vision of Coral Gables as a city with "wide tree-lined avenues, monumental buildings, winding roadways, green space, ornate plazas, and fountains" all in line with the Mediterranean Revival architecture style. As he is quoted in the Merrick House Brochure (<https://www.coralgables.com/coral-gables-merrick-house/>):

Coral Gables is not a thing of the moment, of the year or even of the passing period, but a wonderful monument to the achievement of worthwhile perseverance in the creation of beauty and in the coming true of dreams that will as solidly endure and as beautifully and bountifully age as does the everlasting coral on which this master development is founded.



While we have been fortunate to have elected officials that view Coral Gables not as “a thing of the moment” and truly seek to engage and address residents’ concerns, the proposed Alhambra Circle bicycle path plan has been a complete aberration. Not only has the entire resident stakeholder engagement been severely flawed, but the complete lack of expert studies (safety, environmental, traffic, historic, etc.) conducted regarding the impact that a bicycle path will have on this historic and winding corridor makes the project untenable.

Moreover, because of the misinformation campaign directed by a limited number of city staff members in conjunction with special interest bicycle groups, the residents’ ability to have meaningful input in the Master Bicycle Plan was severely hampered at every turn. Even the name of the project submitted for contractor bidding is far from transparent - “Multimodal Transportation Planning and Engineering Consulting Services.” Why is the construction of bicycle lanes hidden from the public under a secret name? Possibly to limit residents’ ability to recognize and object to the entire project.

Indeed, we experienced a dose of the misinformation campaign when several residents and I attended a Transportation Advisory Board (TAB) meeting on October 16, 2019. After raising several specific questions regarding the Alhambra Circle project, both Asst. Public Works Director Jessica Keller and a Bike Walk member that was a member of TAB (he has since resigned due to a subsequently revealed conflict of interest), provided misleading and incorrect information.

**This was a false accusation, and was not the reason for the resignation**

For this reason, I submit this detailed letter in an attempt to correct the misinformation provided to our elected officials and make sure that all are fully aware of the significant lack of public awareness meetings conducted in relation to the Master Bicycle Plan and more specifically, the complete lack of stakeholder resident engagement regarding the Alhambra Circle bicycle path. After numerous public records requests and analysis over the past two months, it is evident that there is a concerted agenda by certain city staff members and special interest bicycle groups to forge ahead with bicycle lanes throughout the city despite the position of the residents and our elected officials. This wayward agenda must be reigned in by those that lead our city and residents who elect them because today it is bike paths but tomorrow it will be something else.

We are opposed to the Alhambra Circle bicycle path on both procedural and substantive grounds. On a procedural level, the city staff has systematically failed to engage the directly impacted residents over the course of the last five years. Since the Coral Gables Bicycle Plan was drafted by special interests groups such as Bike Walk and Mack Cycle, and adopted by the Commission on June 10, 2014, the city staff did not reach out to the Alhambra Circle residents before starting the implementation process in September 2019. More telling, is the complete lack of public awareness and community support garnered before applying for a Federal Department of Transportation (FDOT) grant in 2015 that is specific to Alhambra Circle bicycle lanes. As explained in more detail below, this lack of due process and respect for residents’ position regarding a bike path that will impact our daily lives and change the nature of our neighborhood, is sufficient to cancel the proposed project.

**There is no requirement to obtain input from adjacent neighbors, and in fact the bicycle lanes on Alhambra and Segovia were constructed without input from neighbors. There is no concurrency requirement. Despite that, the City is currently in the midst of a public input effort, which is how these neighbors are aware of the project.**



On a substantive level, a bicycle path down this historic narrow corridor with big old trees and lush swales makes it a terrible idea. Alhambra Circle is one of the oldest streets in the Gables and has many large trees that form a beautiful canopy which we have enjoyed for decades. There is no question that in order to build a bike path many of these trees will have to be killed or pruned down leading to their eventual slow death. The result will be a concrete jungle with no shade or greenery. This environmental concern, along with the significant safety and traffic issues will have an enormous negative impact on Alhambra Circle and completely transform the ambiance of our neighborhood.

Absolutely false, and explained to the residents at the community meeting and at the walk shop by City arborists and landscape architects

That said, you should understand that we are not against the bike path simply because it is on our street. Our objection is not based on a “not in my backyard” mentality; rather our position is based on substance, data and facts. We are against the bike path because the entire process has been flawed from day one. In fact, we are against any project that systematically seeks to exclude resident voices and forges ahead as if the residents’ views are insignificant. If our views are not sought or respected, then the pattern of ignoring stakeholders positions will continue throughout the city establishing an unacceptable precedent. This is just not right and runs contrary to our city’s commitment to the public engagement process.

#### **Procedural Objection - Lack of Alhambra Circle Resident Engagement**

As with many Alhambra Circle residents, the first time I heard of the proposed bicycle path was when one of my neighbors alerted me to a meeting that was scheduled for September 25, 2019, at the Youth Center. Prior to this, I had not received any notification regarding the meeting or the bicycle path. Indeed, after discussing the meeting with several neighbors on Alhambra Circle, they also had not been notified of the intended bicycle path.

My husband and I attended the meeting and voiced our objections regarding the lack of specific community engagement, safety issues and environmental concerns. Needless to say, there were few residents from the Alhambra Circle corridor and we were extremely surprised to learn how rapidly the plan was moving ahead without input from the directly impacted residents. In fact, consultants had been hired, plans drawn and we were basically informed this was a done deal. Indeed, at the meeting we learned that an “on-site walk through” was scheduled for October 19th, two weeks later, and a global ballot regarding the bike path to be mailed shortly thereafter.

Following the meeting, I spoke to more neighbors and contacted the city explaining that the Alhambra Circle residents had not been engaged in the process and that there were significant safety concerns placing a bicycle path along the bridge and winding roads in front of my house. In fact, over the years there have been numerous accidents and at least one death in front of my house as a result of the dangerous curve combined with the narrow bridge. I was told repeatedly that the project was in the “implementation” phase and led to believe that there was no way to stop the bicycle path on Alhambra Circle. This dismissive attitude towards a directly impacted resident was very disturbing and contrary to city’s commitment to the public engagement process. This project is specifically to improve safety

In fact this was one of the main reasons the Riviera Drive bike path was removed from the



There was never a specific plan developed for Riviera Drive, and the neighbors heard of possible bike lanes throughout the city in one of the preliminary community outreach sessions the city held. No money was spent on a Riviera Drive Bike Plan as there was not a specific plan. At the point this objection was made, the City was laying out possible locations and conceptual designs to the community.

Master Bicycle Plan at the January 23, 2018 Commission meeting. As with the Alhambra Circle residents, the Riviera Drive residents were not specifically engaged and upon learning of the bike path objected to the lack of notice citing numerous concerns with the project. At the meeting, the former City Manager confirmed that there had been no specific or global engagement process when the bicycle routes were identified which was "inconsistent with the direction that you all [elected officials] want us to do in terms of community/neighborhood specific meetings." See Exhibit A. Following this introduction, the residents were allowed to speak, the Commission listened to the significant resident concerns, including lack of notice, and unanimously removed Riviera Drive from the Coral Gables Bicycle Plan. This was not, however, before over \$325,000 was spent on consultants to develop a bicycle plan for Riviera Drive without resident input.

It seems the city staff did not learn from the Riviera Drive experience that resident input was key to constructing a bike path in our city. Eighteen months later, without any Alhambra Circle resident input or specific community/neighborhood meetings, the city forged ahead with its September 25<sup>th</sup> bicycle path implementation meeting for Alhambra Circle. Again consultants were hired and paid without any outreach to the directly affected residents. I was completely baffled by the staff's complete failure to conduct specific community/neighborhood meetings prior to any implementation given our elected officials' clearly voiced concerns during the Riviera Drive Commission meeting. This is the public input process - that is how they know about it.

After reviewing the records provided by the city in response to my public records request, the reason became clear. Much to my surprise, on March 20, 2015, the city applied for an FDOT grant specifically for "Alhambra Circle Bike Lanes." A copy of the FDOT Grant Application is attached hereto as Exhibit B. According to the project description it includes "4.6 miles of bicycle lanes on Alhambra Circle from Coral Way to San Amaro Drive ... [that] would connect the University of Miami to existing bike lanes to downtown Coral Gables." p. 2. No mention is made that such a bike lane already exists on Red Road connecting both sections of the city.

More importantly, according to grant application public awareness activities and community meetings had been held (p.9) and evidence of community support was attached (p.5). Having lived on Alhambra Circle during this entire time I was completely surprised by this representation because no such meetings or activities had taken place. I confirmed this with my neighbors who were equally shocked.

As for the "evidence of community support" - there was none. The only item attached to the grant application was a letter from a special interest group, Bike Walk, obtained the day before the application was submitted. Essentially, Asst. Public Works Director Jessica Keller directly contacted her friends at Bike Walk and requested a letter from the organization as evidence of resident support. As demonstrated in the attached email chain, nothing is further from the truth. The entire "evidence of community support" was manufactured. See Exhibit C. BWCG is a safety advocacy organization

In addition to the lack of community support and public awareness activities, the grant application contains other misstatements. For example, under the Environmental Evaluation section of the application, it states that there is no wildlife or water fowl refuge, no navigable waterways and Bike Walk Coral Gables envisions a Coral Gables community that values cycling and walking as safe and healthy forms of transportation and recreation. We are a non-profit organization that promotes a safe and friendly environment for cyclists and pedestrians by sponsoring programs and events to educate the community. BWCG promotes the accessibility of streets and trails for cyclists and pedestrians so they may enjoy our City's beauty and lush canopy.



no protected species. All statements are incorrect. The proposed bicycle lane would go through the Alhambra Circle bridge and over the Gables canal which is a navigable waterway where many ducks and other water fowl find refuge. Likewise, this area of the canal is a prime location for lounging manatees and the protected crocodile. Indeed, I came to learn that the project corridor is within the consultation area for the Florida bonneted bat, listed as an endangered species. *See* Exhibit D. None of these items were acknowledged in the grant application.

Relying on the misrepresentations contained in the grant application, FDOT awarded the city \$ 597,670.00 on November 2, 2015, for the specific purpose of the construction of bike lanes on Alhambra Circle. This explains why the city staff was forging ahead with the project despite our elected officials' clear directive to seek community awareness and resident input - it had been awarded FDOT funds for a specific project. I brought this to the attention of the Transportation Advisory Board and on October 16, 2019, TAB Chairman Gordon Sokoloff recommended that the project be placed on hold until these issues could be investigated and resident input properly sought. *See* Exhibit E. I do not know where this investigation stands but urge you to stop this project until the directly impacted residents have an opportunity to voice their position.

### **Negative Impact of Bicycle Path on Alhambra Circle Historic Corridor**

In addition to the lack of public awareness meetings and refusal to engage the directly affected residents, the city failed to conduct any impact studies in relation to the viability of a bicycle path on Alhambra Circle. For example, prior to the implementation process there have been no safety, traffic, environmental or historic corridor impact evaluations. I was able to confirm this on November 1, 2019, when we met with Asst. City Manager Eduardo Santamaria, Asst. Public Works Director Jessica Keller and other staffers. Again, given the significant impact that such a bicycle path will have on our neighborhood, I was completely surprised by the lack of impact studies conducted prior to implementation. As demonstrated below, a bike path on Alhambra Circle will be catastrophic for our neighborhood.

First, there are significant safety concerns with a bike path down this narrow and winding corridor. We live two houses south of the Alhambra Circle bridge on one of the two winding curves. There are several blind spots within these double curves that make a bike path particularly dangerous. Sometimes I can barely see the cars coming around the curve, it will be even more difficult to see a bicyclist spinning through the curve. A path in this portion of the corridor will give a cyclist a false sense of safety when it is actually inherently dangerous..

**This is specifically to improve safety, the alternative is to have bike riders, including children, in the street.**

Contrary to the mission statement of safety in the Master Bicycle Plan, a bicycle path in this portion of Alhambra Circle will create a corridor of serious accidents and worse, fatalities. Indeed, there have been numerous traffic accidents in this winding corridor and at least one death. Several years ago, a car crashed into the tree between our home and our neighbor's killing a young woman who missed the curve. Sadly, my neighbor pulled the young woman out of the car but she had passed away. These accidents have involved only cars but there is no question that a bike path will multiply the number of injuries in this portion of Alhambra Circle.

**Not only is the bicycle lane project a safety project I have been unable to find any other accidents in this area besides this nearly 20-year old accident.**



In addition, the bridge itself presents a significant hazard. The 1952 bridge is very narrow and already cars zoom through the bridge. A bicycle path that makes the bridge even more narrow is an accident waiting to happen. According to the consultants, the city plans to build traffic calming islands before and after the bridge to make it safer. The problem with that solution is that immediately upon crossing the bridge due south the road turns and no calming device will cure this dangerous curve. Simply put, a bike path in this area is inherently dangerous.

The opposite is true,

Second, the amount of traffic on Alhambra Circle is quite high. As a collector street, traffic on Alhambra Circle is not a "low impact" area as described in the Bicycle Plan. During the morning and afternoon hours, traffic is backed up all the way from Bird Road to the bridge. Sometimes it takes several minutes before I can exit my driveway during these hours due to the back-up traffic. If the roads are narrowed for a bike path, the traffic congestion will only increase making our daily commutes even worse. This is why a safety improvement is necessary

Surprisingly, no traffic impact studies have been conducted by the city; a study that is required with most proposed construction. According to the city, the only evaluation conducted to date is a speed evaluation. Essentially they placed a wire across the street to assess drivers' speed. This speed analysis will not address or resolve the inevitable traffic congestion in front of our houses if the road is narrowed and a bicycle path constructed. This device also counts traffic.

Third, although Alhambra Circle has been designated as a historic corridor, the city did not seek any input from the Department of Historic Preservation or the Historic Board. Unlike every other historically designated property, where approval must be obtained from the Board to even change a panel of a window, the city did not deem it necessary to obtain guidance regarding the impact of a bike path. Alhambra Circle was designated a historic corridor because of the number of historically significant homes on the street and the ambiance of the corridor. There can be no dispute that a bike path that cuts into the swales and trees on this beautiful corridor will completely change the nature and character of the street transforming it into a concrete bike path highway. That said, the historic preservation Board must be consulted.

The historic corridor only extends south to Sevilla, & includes the portions north of Coral Way which has bike lanes

Fourth and most important are our precious long standing trees that line both sides of Alhambra Circle. It is these trees that form the beautiful canopy that George Merrick envisioned back in 1921. Many of these trees have been standing for over fifty years and any attempt to prune the roots or replant them will lead to their eventual death. A simple walk down this corridor confirms that in order to construct a bike path, multiple trees will have to be removed. No matter the explanations given by city staff, it is our big old trees that define our City Beautiful and we must fight any attempt to harm them and protect the historic nature of our city.

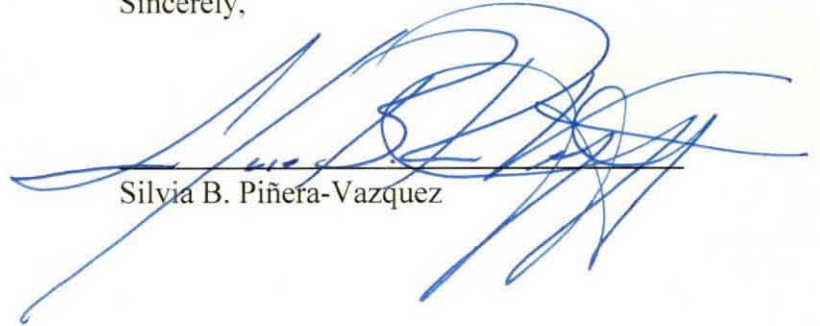
In addition, the lush landscapes found in the swales of many Alhambra Circle homes will be destroyed if a concrete bicycle path is constructed. While we acknowledge that this is city property, we are the stewards of the swales and they form an essential part of our neighborhoods' ambiance. More importantly, if the swales are minimized to place a bike path, where will visitors park? How about the water meters located on the swales, will they also be removed to make way for bikers? It just does not make sense.

Lastly, and the most obvious question is who is requesting a bicycle path? Quite frankly we see little to no bikers on Alhambra Circle that would use a bike path. The early morning peloton riders do not want and will not use a bike path. It is a mystery how this entire project began over five years ago without any actual demand from Coral Gables residents.

This is NOT for "bikers", it is for people on bicycle to get safely through Coral Gables. This is even more important with the addition of Betsy Adams park, and the City-supported Underline project

In closing, I look forward to the appearance at the Commission Meeting scheduled for December 10, 2019, where we can speak directly to our elected officials and highlight the significant adverse effects a bicycle path will have on our historic Alhambra Circle corridor.

Sincerely,



Sylvia B. Piñera-Vazquez