

April 7, 2026



Dear Residents,

Keeping our community safe has always been the most important responsibility of local government, and in Coral Gables it is our top priority. As your Mayor, I'm proud to share an important milestone that reflects our ongoing commitment to the residents who call the City Beautiful home.

Last month, we opened Fire House 4, a new facility that expands fire rescue coverage and strengthens our ability to respond quickly when emergencies happen. The opening of Fire House 4 fulfills a vision that dates back more than a century. When Coral Gables was first planned, our founder, George Merrick, imagined a city served by four fire stations. With the completion of Fire House 4, that vision has finally become a reality.

This milestone is especially meaningful to me. I've had the privilege of serving our community for the past 13 years, first as a City Commissioner and for the past five years as your mayor. During that time, one of my top priorities has been ensuring Coral Gables continues investing in the infrastructure and people needed to keep our residents safe.

Over the past decade, the City has invested substantial sums in making improvements to our fire rescue system. The City built two modern facilities, including our Police & Fire Headquarters that houses Fire Station 1 and the Minorca Garage at a cost of approximately \$90 million, and the recently opened Fire House 4 on Sunset Drive, at a cost of approximately \$11.5 million. The City also completed a full refurbishment of Fire Station 2 on US 1, at a cost of \$15 million, and renovated Fire Station 3 on Old Cutler, at a cost of \$1.5 million. The opening of our newest fire house on Sunset is another important investment in the City's fire rescue system.

Even more important are the remarkable men and women of the Coral Gables Fire Department who serve our residents, visitors, and businesses every day. I fully supported adding 15 firefighter positions over the past few years to meet the needs of our growing community and to staff our new and remodeled facilities. Every member of the Coral Gables Fire Department is also a certified paramedic, ensuring residents receive advanced medical care from the moment our crews arrive.

The stellar reputation of the Coral Gables Fire Department and its firefighters is evident through the high level of interest in joining our department. The Fire Department is typically near fully staffed, with a vacancy rate under 1%. When the City recruits for firefighters, we often receive more than 100 applications within the first day of posting and postings are capped at 250 applicants. Following a rigorous vetting and training process, the Coral Gables Fire Department is staffed with the best of the best.

The City has prioritized—and will continue to prioritize—public safety spending. It continues to be the City's largest expenditure, comprising 35.6% of the City's budget. This spending is in large part attributable to the City's competitive compensation and benefits package. The average gross pay for the City's 145 firefighters in 2025 was approximately \$117,000. Firefighters on shift typically work eight twenty-four shifts per month, which allows them to pursue outside interests and employment.

After a full career with the city, our retired firefighters who enter the city's deferred retirement program (DROP) can earn lump sum payments in the six or seven figures – averaging over \$750,000 per person for those who retired in the past five years. The average annual pension payment for retired firefighters is approximately \$75,000. There are also additional funds—called “175 money”—provided through the State that supplement firefighter retirement payments, often to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Taken together, these benefits place our firefighters in a financially secure position, potentially resulting in total retirement benefits ranging from high six figures into well over \$1 million, in addition to a lifetime annual pension.

In 2013, the City's pension was only 52% funded—one of the lowest funding ratios in the State. In 2015, I championed Resolution 2015-271, which shored up our City's pension by implementing an accelerated pay down policy to aggressively address our unfunded pension liability. The City began making an extra payment every year to the pension. In 2025, that extra payment was more than \$9 million. Through prudent management and strong fiscal policy, that funding ratio has increased to 74.5%—with full pension funding possible within six years given current trends. Once these liabilities are paid down, the City will be able to use those funds for other priorities.

The City's compensation, benefits, and retirement package for firefighters is well-deserved, and the City is proud to offer it. Like any other government or business, however, we must keep a close eye on increases to costs, including to salaries, benefits, and our pension plan. This is especially important this year, with the ongoing discussion in Tallahassee regarding the reduction of property taxes. Nearly 50% of the City's operating revenues are derived from those same property taxes. The fiscal health of the City and its pension plan is paramount to ensuring the City remains competitive and able to continue to provide the public safety services our residents expect and deserve.

I am hopeful that, as we reach the end of the City's current contract with the union representing our firefighters, the City and the union can engage in negotiations that respect the positions of both parties. As always, I am dedicated to ensuring that the City continues to build upon its progress in shoring up the pension system, and that the decisions we make are prudent long-term financial decisions for the benefit of all of the City's residents, businesses, and employees.

The men and women of the Coral Gables Fire Department provide excellent service to our community each and every day. Our new Fire House 4 is more than just a new station. It represents the next investment, in a long line of investments totaling approximately \$118 million, in the City's strong commitment to public safety, in our first responders, and in the Coral Gables community we are proud to serve.

I'm grateful to the City leaders past and present, firefighters, and staff whose dedication made this milestone possible. Together, we will continue building a Coral Gables that is not only beautiful, but safe and resilient for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Vince Lago

Mayor, City of Coral Gables