

State of the Village Address

December 4, 2015

Evelyn Greer Park

**The Honorable Cindy Lerner
Mayor**

Looking back on the past seven years, we have so much to be proud of in Pinecrest. As this will be my last State of the Village address, this will be a retrospective, as I want to share with you the many improvements and enhancements both I and our Council have made over the past seven years, including more improvements to our infrastructure, our programming and our citizen engagement. And I will share where we are heading this coming year.

The role of an elected municipal official is to act as a steward, to protect, preserve, promote, and plan for the future. As we approach the 20th anniversary of our village, I can tell you the state of the Village is strong, vibrant and well positioned to move forward.

Upon taking office in 2008, the Village had just completed and opened the Community Center, having a few years prior built the Municipal Center and Evelyn Greer Park and purchased the Parrot Jungle property, renaming it and breathing botanic life into Pinecrest Gardens. So, although the building of our basic municipal operations and infrastructure was completed, we had no strategic plan for moving forward, and so we went about planning for our future.

When I was sworn in as Mayor in November of 2008, the way the Village operated under the former manager, former police chief and past Council administration, there had been a strong and pervasive attitude about how the Village was to be run and even a somewhat unfriendly attitude toward our residents. And quite frankly it wasn't pretty. It's one of the main reasons I decided to run for Mayor. There was little in the way of citizen engagement or input. There was very little in the way of delivery of

information to our constituents. And if a resident had a concern or a complaint, they rarely found resolution to their satisfaction. That has all changed dramatically over the past seven years. Resident engagement, and service first, exceeding expectations has been the hallmark of our administration.

Communication by the Village to the residents, prior to 2008, was extremely limited, as there was no monthly news provided to residents. Since December 2008, each and every month the Village has sent out an electronic newsletter. We began by sending out a monthly electronic newsletter, which, for the first 5 years I wrote exclusively myself, until we hired a communications manager at my suggestion. Now, our communications staff writes and edits the newsletter; providing information and updates about upcoming programs and events, and I continue to submit a monthly article with an analysis of current issues before the Council. We have taken the Leisure Guide and transformed it into a quarterly community information and news guide mailed to every home in the Village. The communications staff issues monthly press releases, and news articles for local community newspapers and magazines. We have not only the twice monthly Pinecrest Tribune, we now also have two monthly magazines. And Pinecrest now has a Mobile App for smartphones, You can get information, updates, ask questions and register complaints directly from your phone! Looking forward, the Village must continue to identify ways to further and better inform our residents, and I have asked the manager to provide the residents with a weekly calendar of upcoming events, both electronically and through hard copy at our informational kiosks at our parks and library and at local businesses.

In 2008, there was only one citizen advisory committee, for Pinecrest Gardens. We now have an Education Advisory Council, a Transportation Advisory Committee and a Community Center Advisory Committee and a Youth Advisory Council. I am particularly proud of our 20 member Youth Council, students from middle and high school have been involved in civic education and service to our Village for the past 7 years. The first year YACs who were in 8th grade, are now juniors in college. Each advisory committee

provides an opportunity for our residents to provide input with their ideas, and commentary in an advisory capacity, provide recommendations about infrastructure, programs and new resources for our community. We started a Citizen's Academy as a regular opportunity. Looking forward we should further expand our citizen engagement through intergenerational programming for our youth and our seniors. We should expand our internship opportunities for both students and for volunteer seniors. We are expanding our community services beyond Pinecrest through our Youth Advisory Council, and can do the same with our senior programs, and work on those aspects of community education partnerships with our local schools and with our universities.

The most obvious and notable improvement over the past seven years has been to Pinecrest Gardens, from the botanic quality of the gardens themselves, to the development of a vivacious and extremely popular cultural arts venue and program. When we look at the blossoming of Pinecrest Gardens, it is hard to believe how far we have come. The gardens was treated as just another park , the Banyan Bowl still had mulch on the ground, no lighting, sound system fans or new seating, and there were was little in the way of cultural arts. Now we have a full stage, lighting and sound system, and a full schedule of music, theatre and other performing arts. We bring in wonderful arts in the gallery, and nationally renowned sculptors such as Philip Haas. We have installed a walking tour guide, signage and gotten state grants to support the programming and the facility improvements. The gardens have received numerous grants, both for cultural arts and capital improvements from the state, county and non-profits such as Knight Arts Challenge. And our Pinecrest Garden Club and Charitable Garden Fund have continued to provide significant improvement and enhancements grants as well. And we have poured many new resources, including a cell phone tour guide and education into our programs, with a full time education program coordinator who conducts outreach, field trips for schools and programs at the gardens. And the farmers market was moved over to the gardens, and has expanded to every Sunday year round. We also received a grant to rebuild the Hammock Pavilion including support

from the Charitable Garden Fund. Going forward, the gardens' master plan will continue to update needs, and your Council will look for further opportunities to provide enhancements the community supports.

Although the Village of Pinecrest benefits from the funding of transportation and transit through the half penny Citizens Transportation Tax, in 2008 we had \$500,000 sitting in the transit account without any transit program. Shortly before I was elected, Pinecrest was notified by the county that they would be retrieving that \$500,000 and giving it to other cities that would make use of it. I quickly notified the county that we would make use of it and would develop a transit program. A year later, in January, 2012, we created the Pinecrest People Mover circulator which reduces traffic congestion around our schools, lowering our carbon footprint. Ridership has gone from several hundred students a month when it first began, up to more than 4,500 a month this past year, showing strong community support and participation. Just imagine how many cars are off the street and the amount of carbon reduction we accomplish every day that students ride the People mover.

And this year my request to the Council was approved to add funds for a specialized on demand transportation program for our seniors who have reduced mobility or who no longer drive and need to have access to our Community Center, library and gardens, as well as local shopping, expected to operate 5 days a week. I am so excited to announce that, upon final approval by Council, we will soon be instituting an on demand transit program for seniors, hopefully by next month. The concept for this on-demand program will be for residents 55 and older, and will provide door to door service and bring them to participate in our community enrichment and health programs and our Pinecrest library, which is now once again open 6 days a week. With the new 7,000 square foot expansion, our Community Center will be able to provide more fitness, more programming, an indoor play area for toddlers, and finally a snack bar for those who want to catch a few minutes to socialize at the center. We are partnered with the UM Osher Institute for Lifelong Learning, Baptist Health and many other enrichment programs.

We also now have a formal seniors program, which did not exist in 2008, and a senior activities coordinator. We have our twice yearly Pinecrest Pioneer luncheons, which is my favorite event, we continue to capture and document our oral histories of our longest lived residents to preserve our history and their legacy. The oral histories are available on the website. I hope this will continue to be a permanent part of Pinecrest's collection of our living history.

We are most proud of the leadership we have been recognized for in what first started in 2009 with a Going Green Task Force, and is now a comprehensive sustainability program that has seen significant changes in our Building Code, creation of a sustainability fund, our Land Use Code and now not just sustainability, but also aimed at achieving the resiliency we seek to achieve as we address climate change impacts, including extreme weather events and sea level rise. In 2008, the Village did not even have its own recycling program at our parks or government buildings. We had no sustainable policies for procurement, operations within the administration, or in our building and land use code.

So, Pinecrest is recognized as a leader in sustainability, and have been certified by the Florida Green Building Council, recognized by Sustainable Florida with sustainable government of the year award, and this year were awarded by the Florida League of Cities for our sustainable practices. We have updated our land use codes. We measured our greenhouse gas emissions in 2013 to establish a baseline, and set goals for reducing our carbon footprint, and are updating it again this year. We have worked collaboratively with our partner, the Cleo Institute, and its director Caroline Lewis, and closely with our 5 schools. We have a yearly Earth Day Festival to inform and involve our community. This includes a focus on improving our transit options, our mobility options by improving our sidewalks and roads, so that instead of hopping into the car to go to the park, or to the market, or to the store, if it's just a few blocks away, we will have created safe streets, safe sidewalks and safe paths to encourage leaving the car at home.

We are in the process of drafting a Climate Action Plan, and as Mayor, I have signed the Compact of Mayors, committing to finalize a climate action plan and continue to identify additional ways to reduce our carbon footprint. We have undergone a GHG emissions assessment and set goals to reduce them, by enhancing our transit options and significantly increasing the use of energy efficient and renewable energy improvements in Pinecrest. We have identified and designated adaptation action areas, in our comprehensive land use plan, and our staff have all recently been trained on climate change awareness, and our climate change workshops for residents, help us become more informed and engaged and understand what we must do to prepare for our future extreme weather events, sea level rise and other adverse impacts. I have been invited to climate change/resiliency conferences in Europe, in Los Angeles, in New Hampshire, and Colorado over the past two years. By presenting what we are doing and bringing back expertise from other cities, we are well positioned to lead this county and collaborate with the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Action Plan.

We have installed 3 fast, free and public electric vehicle charging stations to encourage more residents to buy electric vehicles. The Village recently completed a Stormwater Master Plan, and are working to be part of the community rating system which will provide our residents with discounted insurance premiums. Going forward, the Village leaders and our residents must focus on making the financial commitments necessary to shield our built environment from the ravages of sea level rising by making the significant investments in the drainage improvements identified in our stormwater master plan. Our residents and commercial sector will make significant increases in energy efficiency and solar, the climate action plan contemplates significant expansion of solar on Pinecrest homes' rooftops and I hope to see solar installations on our own municipal buildings in the near future.

Public Safety includes making our streets safer for those in a car and for pedestrians. Our red light cameras on US 1 at 4 intersections are finally online, will have a noticeable impact on reducing red light running. Building traffic circles, such as the one on 104th Street, planning for other traffic calming improvements, installing more sidewalks, help promote more

pedestrian friendly neighborhood access to parks, schools, and shopping. Planning for bike routes, will continue, and assuring that we work collaboratively with our neighboring cities and the county to provide interconnectedness.

Our nationally accredited Police Department has helped build a large and successful neighborhood watch program of 25 neighborhood watch groups, it now participates in the multi-disciplinary task force, our department is bringing on a K-9 unit, has a new crime suppression unit, a motorcycle unit, and we just approved this year the hiring of an additional 5 officers, including another detective. And as of now, we have just hired those 5 new officers. Going forward, I hope we will begin to make investments in street lighting in the Village, it would be another crime prevention measure that more and more residents are asking for. As result of our investments, as of this date, crime is down in Pinecrest about 15% this year compared to last year.

Another critical asset that attracts young families to settle here in Pinecrest are our 5 fabulous public schools, around which our neighborhoods were built in the 1950s. As an alumni of Palmetto Elementary, Junior and Senior High, I can tell you, they may still look exactly the same as they did growing up here in the 60s. Perhaps a new building here or there, but they are exactly the same. Soon we will see many new improvements and additions as a result of approval county-wide of the 21st Century School Bond program. And Palmetto Senior will see a brand new \$35 million school rise up over the next 2 years. Pinecrest can be proud of the partnership we have built with the school district, with our Educational Compact, our Education Advisory Council and our financial support of the schools each year, both through our allocations and through our fundraising with Fashion in the Gardens.

Planning for the future: We began the process by first developing our Strategic Plan in 2010 which was updated this year. We then moved on to create a US 1 Vision Plan, a Community Center Expansion Plan, a Coral Pine Park improvement plan, an Annexation Study and a Stormwater Master

Plan. What we still have left to do, as a municipality, is to complete the most important of our infrastructure needs, including potable water, and stormwater drainage. This requires that we continue to plan for our financial sustainability. There remain significant infrastructure needs that have not yet been addressed, despite our best efforts. The potable water project has not been completed, and this was something the community, myself included, came together to advocate for a smarter solution to funding the infrastructure before I ran for office, has inspired me to continue the effort. Unfortunately, the year I was elected, the federal government ended their congressional earmark funding of local infrastructure and our efforts to acquire a grant from the state and the county has come up empty year after year. But here again, I vow to continue that effort as I believe it this the responsibility of Miami-Dade County, and I will not stop fighting for the funds we so desperately need to finish that project.

We have always relied almost exclusively on property tax revenues mostly from residences as the revenue stream. Our commercial sector is so small, just a narrow strip along the eastern corridor of US 1 that it only accounts for a mere 13% of our revenues. Other sources of revenue are reliant on state and federal funding streams, some of which are at risk of state or federal action that would eliminate these revenue streams. Even tax exempt municipal bonds may end up on the chopping block in the near future. We would clearly be in a much better financial position if we could significantly expand our revenue base to include more reliance on commercial than we now have, which would result in less reliance on residential property tax.

So again this year, I will renew my urging that the Village look seriously at annexing a small area west of US 1, where we have already done a study of a much larger area than we would ever want to consider. Now that the county has received a comprehensive report from their consultant outlining how they could go forward toward allowing incorporations and annexations, we are well positioned to seriously move forward. That would give us tremendous opportunities to a vibrant commercial and residential sector.

Our strategic plan envisions the potential for growth of our Village in the future, by expanding our reach and that opportunity may soon present itself. Whether it is soon, or 10 years from now, when the county does finally plan for full incorporation and annexation, we are prepared and positioned to embrace neighboring communities still a part of the county. Going forward, I hope that our Annexation Study, which analyzes the costs and the significant net benefits of growth through annexation, across US 1, is something that our residents will embrace and our future council will be bold enough to move forward on. There will only be a limited window of time upon which we could grow, or else live forever restricted to limited future opportunities. All you have to do is look at our neighboring cities that have much longer history to learn from, and they have numerous examples of healthy and positive growth through annexation. I recently went on a tour of much of the City of Miami with the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, guided by local historian Dr. Paul George. The City of Miami was incorporated in 1895, and in 1925, the city annexed Coconut Grove and Silver Bluff when they were 30 years young. As your mayor, I and your Council have a responsibility to see into the future, to study what has made other older cities successful, and learn from them, and though we won't be acting on this or other longer term items over the next year, we must continue to plan, not just for the short term but for the long term as well.

Though my term will end next November, my work on issues such as this will not end, as I was an outspoken advocate long before being elected, as I have continued while in office and will certainly continue to be an outspoken advocate after leaving office, and I hope you and our community will join me in continuing to advocate for such improvements and growth for our Village.

So, as I deliver this, my last State of the Village address, I look forward to continuing, with your Council, the improvements we will focus on over this next year, and hope that the direction we have set will be one that continues on into the future. Thanks to our wonderful staff in building and zoning, planning, code enforcement, public works, police, parks, Pinecrest Gardens, and the Manager's Office, for their commitment to excellence, thanks to our

community volunteers and leaders who keep their eyes on the needs and the future of the Village, and to our current and former councilmembers who have helped make this first 20 years one where we can all be proud to say - we live in Pinecrest, the small town with the big reputation!