

Posted on Thu, Jun. 09, 2011

## Miami Beach officials' Art Basel trips called a 'junket'

By David Smiley  
The Miami Herald



Artwork by Dutch artist Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin at the Art Basel, Switzerland, Wednesday, June 14, 2006. (AP Photo/Keystone/Georgios Kefalas)

With the June 15 opening of Art Basel just days away, a delegation of Miami Beach officials is preparing for a trip to the Swiss city and sister festival to the Beach's art extravaganza. Also packing their bags: the city manager's wife and a commissioner's husband.

Miami Beach taxpayers are picking up the tab — at least \$86,500 since 2005, including roughly \$17,300 to pay for the plane tickets of spouses, girlfriends and guests.

The city says the annual trips solidify relationships with their Swiss counterparts and are a key reason behind a decade of Art Basel Miami Beach,

arguably the city's premier event. To ethics investigators, however, using city funds to pay for friends and family — and failing to disclose their travel as a gift — skirts the line.

"To the citizen out there, your wife getting to go to Basel, Switzerland, for a week is a junket," Michael Murawski, a Miami-Dade ethics commission advocate, told City Manager Jorge Gonzalez last month.

Gonzalez and other officials say the trips are key to cultivating and expanding on their business relationship with Art Basel organizers, whose three-year Miami Beach agreement ends after its December show. They stress their spouses play an integral role while in Switzerland.

"It's not like they go off on shopping trips all day," Gonzalez told The Miami Herald. "It's quite the opposite."

Other publicly funded agencies, however, say they do not pay for the travel of guests. Tony Ojeda Jr., executive director of Miami-Dade County's International Trade Consortium, said guests are allowed but other than elected officials and county employees, "anybody who goes pays." A spokeswoman for the public-private Beacon Council, tasked with spurring economic growth for the county, wrote "we do not pay for any guests to go on our missions, even our volunteers must pay their own way."

And according to an Art Basel spokeswoman, while members of the Executive Council of the Canton of Basel-Stadt sometimes travel to Miami Beach and other destinations with their spouses, both guests and council members pay their way.

City officials have made the trip to Basel — a river town not much bigger than Miami Beach with

an economy based on the arts and pharmaceutical manufacturing — since before Art Basel Miami Beach began in 2002. Usually, the delegation consists of the manager, mayor and a commissioner, their spouse or guest, and a city staffer. The travel is funded by fees paid to the city for Art Basel Miami Beach events, according to the city, and the staffer's trip is paid for by the county's convention and visitors bureau, which also sends an employee.

Miami Beach officials say they and their guests not only promote the city at an Art Basel booth in Switzerland, but meet with the media and attend social functions with Swiss officials whose spouses also attend.

#### 'PROTOCOL'

Records show Gonzalez has traveled each year to Basel since at least 2003, and last month he told ethics commissioners that he takes his wife with him because city "protocol" requests it. Gonzalez said with his wife along for the trip, the couple has to pay to bring their two school-age children as well. Afterward they go on a European vacation.

"To dispel the junket notion, this trip ends up costing me way more than it should," said Gonzalez, whose annual compensation last year was \$274,689.

Records show that former mayor David Dermer — who is single — took a girlfriend in 2005, a family member in 2006, and an unnamed guest in 2007.

Former commissioners Saul Gross and Richard Steinberg traveled with their wives in 2006 and 2007, respectively, and Luis Garcia Jr. flew to Basel in 2005 with a woman he said was his fiancé. Current commissioners Jerry Libbin, Ed Tobin and Deede Weithorn have followed suit with their spouses, in 2008, 2009 and 2010, respectively.

Last year, the Weithorns, Commissioner Michael Góngora and the Gonzalezes stayed at Hotel Basel. The two commissioners' rooms cost the city \$640 and \$670 per night, respectively. Gonzalez stayed in the same \$740-a-night junior suite as in 2009. His children stayed free.

Overall, the city spent nearly \$16,500 for the 2010 trip, including plane tickets that cost an average of \$1,400, and meals such as the June 17 lunch at Pilatus-Bahnen that cost taxpayers \$77.35 for Weithorn and \$82.53 for Góngora. Since 2005, the city has paid nearly \$86,500 for plane tickets, hotel rooms, and taxi and train rides.

This year, the delegation includes Gonzalez and his wife, Weithorn and her husband, Mayor Matti Herrera Bower and a friend — whom she says is paying her own way — and Dennis Leyva of the city and George Neary of the convention bureau. From June 12 to June 18, the officials are scheduled to attend a dozen events such as guided tours, receptions, and Art Basel Vernissage, a VIP-only early gathering of art collectors and socialites.

Gonzalez said Art Basel is one of the city's most positive and economically beneficial events and he doesn't want to risk slighting Basel officials by leaving spouses at home.

"There have been rumors at different times that Basel might leave. Do you want to risk that? I don't," he said. "Not on my watch. And so we make sure we take the appropriate steps, protocol or otherwise, to ensure that Art Basel is here as long as they want to and we can keep them."

But Jerry Haar, associate dean of Florida International University's College of Business Administration and a professor of management and international business, said he's not convinced the spouses make any difference.

"I seriously doubt whether any municipality will have their proposal jeopardized if they do not bring their spouse," he said.

#### PAID OWN WAY

Not all city officials have allowed the city to pay. Commissioner Jonah Wolfson paid for both he and his wife when they made the trip to Basel in 2008.

"I didn't feel it was appropriate to ask the taxpayers to pay for me to go to Europe," he said.

The practice of traveling with spouses recently drew the attention of the Miami-Dade Ethics Commission after Murawski learned Gonzalez had failed to report the travel of his wife as a gift — something the state ethics commission opined was necessary in late 2006. Miami-Dade ethics commissioners, however, dismissed a complaint against Gonzalez last month, saying he made an innocent mistake and quickly corrected it when told. After learning some elected officials likewise had not disclosed the travel of their spouses, ethics commissioners agreed to send a letter of instruction to the city.

The city has yet to receive the letter, city attorney Jose Smith said Wednesday.

Weithorn, who last year paid for her children to fly to Europe and then went on a family vacation to Spain before flying home, said the notion that the trip is a junket is insulting. She said she and her husband worked hard for the city while in Basel, and focusing on his \$1,650 plane ticket is trivial.

"Basel is, in my opinion, an important economic piece of our city and we should do everything we can for it to stay here," she said. "I'd like us to get back to the important issues."