



**CASE
CLOSED**

Date: 11-12-19

Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics & Public Trust
Investigative Report

Investigator: Karl Ross
Complainant(s):
Case Name: Miami Beach/ North Bay
Village Restaurant Crawl
Date Open: Sept. 11, 2019

Case: PI 19-36
Subject(s): North Bay Village
Commissioner Julianna Strout
Date Closed: November 8, 2019

Allegation(s):

COE received anonymous information alleging that North Bay Village (NBV) Commissioner Julianna Strout may have incurred in a conflict of interest relating to a proposed “restaurant crawl” event to be funded by Miami Beach to promote restaurants in the North Beach/ NBV area. Prism Creative Group of Miami Beach was to be hired to market the proposed event.

More specifically, it was alleged that Strout may have sought to use her influence to cross-promote the “restaurant crawl” with an unrelated charitable event she was supporting. The event in question was a fund-raiser for Best Buddies International, scheduled for November 23rd in the vicinity of the North Beach Bandshell in Miami Beach.

The allegation was that Strout sought to persuade Miami Beach officials to schedule the restaurant crawl for November 23rd, the same day as the Best Buddies event. Based on the above information, a preliminary inquiry was opened by this agency.

Relevant Ordinances:

The Miami-Dade Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance states under Subsection (g), titled *Exploitation of official position prohibited*, that:

“No person ... shall use or attempt to use his or her official position to secure special privileges or exemptions for himself or herself or others except as may be specifically permitted by other ordinances or resolutions ...”

Investigation:

Interviews

On September 12, COE contacted Miami Beach Economic Development Director Bo Martinez to request an update on the proposed “restaurant crawl” event between Miami Beach and North Bay

Village. Martinez responded by copying COE on an email sent the following day to Miami Beach City Manager Jimmy Morales and his assistant, Susie Torriente.

In pertinent part, Mr. Martinez advised as follows:

“At the July 31, 2019 City Commission meeting, the commission authorized the administration to negotiate with PRISM to handle the logistics, promotion and entertainment for a restaurant crawl in North Beach not exceed \$20,000. Last week we were informed by the PRISM Group that they will not be moving forward with the contract due to not having the bandwidth to execute such an event. As part of our due diligence, staff met with eight restaurants in the North Beach area to see if they were interested in hosting and being part of the proposed crawl. Staff received only one response back from the eight restaurant establishments we reached out to via on-site visits and follow-up emails. Another challenge that impacted the planning and timing of the proposed event was the threat of Hurricane Dorian which was forecasted to hit South Florida and Miami Beach.

“With the recent announcement of the newly formed Normandy Fountain Business Association, staff believes we can work in partnership with association and businesses to support future events and activations in the North Beach area. We look forward to continuing all our hard work to bring economic vitality, prosperity and new investment to North Beach.”

Given that the proposed contract with Prism to support the event was declined, it was decided this matter should not be pursued further by this agency. COE investigators Ross and Nesmith reached out to Strout on September 16 to advise her to this situation.

During the phone conversation, Strout advised as follows:

- That she had been working on the proposed restaurant crawl with Miami Beach Comm. Ricky Arriola, and that she was aware the event had been canceled.
- That she had been asked to assist Best Buddies with a fund-raiser on November 23rd to be held, in part, on the sandy area surrounding the North Beach Band Shell.
- That she was not being paid in connection with the Best Buddies event.
- That she had previously discussed the matter with COE Executive Director Jose Arrojo, and that she was advised she did not have any potential conflicts.

Strout was advised that she would be provided with a copy of the close-out report.

Document/Audio/Video Review:

Miami Beach City Commission resolution #C7 G from July meeting

A resolution dated July 29, 2019, was obtained from the Miami Beach official website relating to a supplemental item (#C7 G), authorizing the Miami Beach City Manager to enter into an agreement

with Prism [Creative] Group not to exceed \$20,000 to fund a proposed “restaurant crawl.” The event would cross-promote restaurants in the vicinity of Miami Beach’s North Beach neighborhood along with those located in neighboring North Bay Village.

Minutes from the item reflect that NBV Comm. Strout “stated that there were certain aspects of the Resolution that could be amended” and noted that an event involving restaurants from both municipalities was going to be held at the North Beach Bandshell. She further described the event as “an around the world tour tasting” of restaurants from these “sister cities.”

Social media post by Miami Beach Comm. Michael Gongora

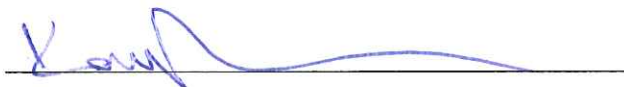
A post by Comm. Gongora dated August 9 features Gongora and NBV Comm. Strout outside a restaurant in Miami Beach in which Gongora states: “Great working dinner with Commissioner Julianna Strout from North Bay Village discussing the upcoming Best Buddies event (stay tuned for details) and an upcoming evening of food & fun connecting North Beach and #North Bay Village #Miami Beach.”

Email string between Comm. Strout, Prism Creative Group, and MB officials

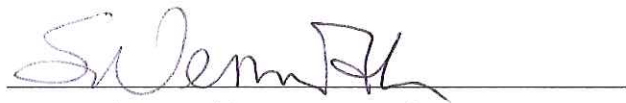
An email string initiated by Comm. Strout on August 1 shows that Strout sought to contact Prism’s founder, Isabella Acker, regarding the proposed restaurant crawl. The record shows that Acker agreed to a phone conference with Strout but later declined the meeting, citing concerns by Miami Beach officials. Acker wrote on August 5 that Miami Beach officials asked that Acker not discuss the event with Strout “as we have not been hired yet.” Comm. Strout responded the same day, stating: “It’s important that everyone needs to get on the same page here. If we don’t all communicate this won’t work. North Bay Village is half of the equation here. I think it would be great to have everyone on the call ... How do we proceed here? I just hope I didn’t waste 7 hours of my day fighting for an item that can’t happen now.”

Conclusion(s):

After a review by the Ethics Advocate, it was determined that this matter should be closed with no further action. No violations of the ethics code appear to be implicated.



Karl Ross, COE Investigator



Susannah Nesmith, COE Investigator

Approved by:



Michael Murawski, Advocate



Jose Arrojo, Executive Director

