



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Spa day in Monaco anyone? Ethics panel clears city commissioner's Monte Carlo trip

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Holding elected office in a small city rarely qualifies as glamorous. Then there's the North Miami Beach commissioner who flew to Monte Carlo for a week to catch an art exhibit with Prince Albert II.

The free trip last spring by Phyllis Smith was endorsed by fellow commissioners at a public meeting. She also filed the appropriate state form disclosing the \$7,000 gift, which came from a wealthy French artist who had already donated to North Miami Beach its centerpiece statue outside City Hall.

In a report issued last week, Miami-Dade's ethics commission praised the transparency surrounding acceptance of the gift. The panel found no issues with the 2017 trip by Smith, who volunteered to represent the city for the event on the French Riviera and was accompanied by Nicole Gomez, the full-time chief of staff at North Miami Beach.

The tale of the luxe side of official business in North Miami Beach comes to light at a tumultuous time for the city of 44,000 people, which recently lost its mayor to a campaign-finance probe and has been racing to fill vacancies on a short-staffed City Commission.

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"I just think the trip was all wrong," said Stephanie Kienzle, author of the Voters Opinion blog and a frequent critic of North Miami Beach's leadership who filed the ethics complaints about the getaway. "I don't think any elected official should take a trip like that."



North Miami Beach Commissioner Phyllis Smith, who represented the city during a free trip to the French Riviera in the spring of 2017. Miami-Dade's Ethics Commission recently dismissed a complaint about the trip.

The city defended the trip as appropriate, given the donor was Stéphane Bolongaro, the same wealthy sculptor who last year gifted North Miami Beach his whimsical creation called "Totor," a nine-foot-tall Jack Russell statue with a paw outstretched in high-five fashion.

"We were able to establish a relationship," Gomez said Tuesday of the March 2017 trip, about six months before the statue was unveiled. "We have this beautiful dog statue we received."

Bolongaro, listed as a former owner of a North Miami Beach art gallery, lives in France and invited city officials to visit him in Monte Carlo around the same time he offered the "Totor" statue. The invitation was discussed at a 2016 commission meeting, and Smith volunteered to go. Gomez went with her.

The itinerary: business-class tickets to France, then a 15-minute helicopter ride to Monaco, followed by about a week at the Fairmont Monte Carlo. The main event was a March 28 Bolongaro art show "under the patronage of HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco," as described in the artist's invitation to then-mayor George Vallejo.

There were side trips as well. An email from Gomez, the city chief of staff, outlining some of the complimentary entertainment listed day trips for lunch in Nice and San Remo, and a "Spa Day in Monaco."

Smith, who earns about \$27,000 as a city commissioner through salary and allowances, was not available for an interview Tuesday. On April 11, the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust approved a staff report clearing Smith in Kienzle's complaint. A state ethics panel also dismissed a similar complaint by Kienzle.

The county report called Smith's trip to Monaco "transparent, well-documented, authorized travel sanctioned by the City."

