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Office of the Inspector General
Miami-Dade County

Final Report

To: Mr. Steve Shiver, County Manager

Received by Date

Ms. Angela Gittens, Director
Miami-Dade Aviation Department

Received by Date

From: Christopher Mazzella
Inspector General

Date: December 12, 2001

Re: OIG Investigation into the solicitation by Sergio Casas of MDAD letters of introduction.

I. SYNOPSIS

At the request of the Miami-Dade Aviation Department, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reviewed the circumstances surrounding the publication of a private for-profit magazine titled *Viajes International (Viajes)* and its efforts to produce an issue devoted to the Miami International Airport. Specifically, the OIG reviewed whether a letter written on behalf of the magazine by two Miami-Dade Aviation Department (MDAD) officials -- Administrative Officer III for Public Affairs Marc Henderson and Deputy Director Amaury Zuriarrain -- was within the proper scope of their office.

Our investigation revealed that the magazine in question appears to be only marginally legitimate. The one copy that the OIG was able to obtain was riddled with spelling, syntax and production errors. There is no office or telephone number for the magazine printed anywhere in the magazine. The text was lifted almost entirely from the MDAD 1999 Annual Report without acknowledgement. Although the magazine purports to be distributed throughout Latin America, the text is entirely in English. Furthermore, the manner in which the editor of *Viajes*, Sergio Casas, solicited funds for advertising may be in violation of Florida tax laws, in that he

requested that checks be written out to him personally. There are no corporate records filed in the State of Florida for the magazine. At the time that Mr. Zuriarrain and Mr. Henderson wrote and signed the letters of recommendation on MDAD letterhead, Mr. Casas was wanted by the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office for issuing a worthless check, a third-degree felony, in an unrelated matter.

Because of the unorthodox nature of these business practices, it is clear that the letters of recommendation never should have been written. Apparently, Mr. Zuriarrain and Mr. Henderson largely based their decision to write the letters on their familiarity with Mr. Casas and the magazine from one publication dating back to 1984. However no recent inquiries about the publication or Mr. Casas were made. Furthermore, Mr. Henderson never checked with his superiors before writing a letter that was essentially an endorsement of a business. Many advertisers believed the letters inferred that the magazine was an MDAD sanctioned project. That is not the case. As a result of the impression left by those letters, the credibility of MDAD was potentially damaged among people with whom the department has a long-standing business relationship.

II. THE LETTERS

When the OIG was asked to look into this matter, MDAD officials were aware of only one letter of recommendation, the one signed by Mr. Zuriarrain and dated October 5, 2000. (Exhibit 1) During the course of the investigation, the OIG discovered a second letter in circulation among the vendors, the one signed by Mr. Henderson and dated August 18, 2000. (Exhibit 2) The two letters are nearly identical.

One slight variation is that Mr. Henderson's letter reads *"If you have any questions, please contact me at 305.876.7017 during the business hours of 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday,"* and Mr. Zuriarrain's letter reads *"If you have any questions please contact our office of public information. Mr. Marc Henderson, of our staff, will attempt to answer any question you may have."* The letter signed by Mr. Zuriarrain contains the additional sentence: *"This publication produced an issue about our airport several years ago and it was well received."*

On May 4, 2001, a concerned businessman gave MDAD officials a copy of the Zuriarrain letter after being approached by Mr. Casas. Because his name was on it as a reference, Mr. Henderson was asked what he knew about the letter. In an e-mail communication to Vivian Robles, Senior Executive Secretary to MDAD Director Angela Gittens, Mr. Henderson stated that he "had little involvement" with Mr. Casas and was "unaware" that his name was on the Zuriarrain letter.

Mr. Henderson's denial that he knew about the Zuriarrain letter prompted the MDAD to request the OIG look into the matter. During the course of this investigation, an engineering firm that had been approached by Mr. Casas supplied the OIG with a copy of the Henderson letter. Mr. Henderson has since acknowledged that he wrote this letter.

III. VIAJES INTERNATIONAL

The Zuriarrain letter makes reference to an earlier issue of *Viajes*. The OIG obtained a copy of this issue from the engineering firm of Bliss & Nyitray - a 1984 edition in which Bliss & Nyitray advertised. Sergio T. Casas-Cordero is listed as the editor. That issue appears to have been professionally produced to the satisfaction of the advertisers. There have been no known issues of *Viajes* published since then.

Mr. Casas deposited a copy of the current issue of *Viajes*, dated June 2001, at MDAD offices on an unknown date. MDAD officials forwarded the copy to the OIG. It is not clear whether this copy is the final issue or a proof. None of the advertisers that the OIG contacted had seen this copy of the magazine. The OIG could not locate any other copies in circulation. (Exhibit 3)

Page 3 of the June 2001 issue lists the magazine's address as P.O. Box 490403, Key Biscayne, Florida 33149. U.S. Postal Service records reveal that the post office box is held in the name of Amparo Rodas, and that Mr. Casas receives mail at that location. There is no telephone number or other contact information listed in the magazine.

Furthermore, there does not appear to be any company called *Viajes International* in existence in Florida. There is no phone number listing for the magazine. There is no physical address. There are no incorporation papers filed with the Florida State Department, Division of Corporations. The OIG determined that Mr. Casas routinely asked advertisers to make checks out to him personally rather than to *Viajes*, and that he never supplied a tax identification number. There is no indication that Mr. Casas has been paying the Florida sales and use tax on this money. As a result, this matter is being referred to the Florida State Department of Revenue and the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office for investigation.

IV. SERGIO CASAS

Sergio Casas is the name listed on page 3 of the current magazine as the Editor. From court documents, postal records, drivers license records, and previous publications the OIG has determined that Mr. Casas, 74 years old, is also known as Sergio Cordero, Sergio Casas-Cordero, and Sergio Casacordero. The Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office had filed a felony information against Mr. Casas, as Sergio Cordero, for one count of issuing a worthless check, a third-degree felony, on December 28, 1999. According to the court file, Mr. Cordero intentionally wrote a check on May 11, 1999, for \$571.90 to B&R Electronics Supply, Inc, on a closed account from Banco Interandind, of Lima, Peru, which has a "payable-through" account arrangement with Barclays Bank in Miami. Barclays cancelled payment of the check on May 14, 1999. On January 20, 2000, an alias *capias*, i.e. bench warrant, was issued for Mr. Casas' arrest after he failed to appear at a court hearing. The alias *capias* is still in effect, as it was during the period in which Mr. Casas was requesting the letters of recommendations from Mr. Henderson and Mr. Zuriarrain.

The OIG could not locate Mr. Casas. Visits to his two last known addresses were unsuccessful. He left a contact number with Bliss & Nyitray as well as an e-mail address for a Janet Troncos, who appears on the *Viajes* masthead and in the two recommendation letters as the magazine's photographer.

The contact number belongs to an Oksana Aicolino, of Hialeah. The OIG contacted Ms. Aicolino on August 30, 2001. She explained that she is a friend of Mr. Casas and is holding messages for him. She added that he is in Lima, Peru, where the magazine is being printed. She did not know how to reach him there. Ms. Aicolino said that she has received numerous calls from people concerned about the magazine's production. The OIG later e-mailed Ms. Troncos at the address given to Bliss and Nyitray. Someone who identified himself as Sergio Casas responded via Ms. Troncos's email account. Mr. Casas stated that he would be out of the country until September 18, 2001, but would be available to meet after that. (Exhibit 4) Further attempts to contact Mr. Casas via e-mail were unsuccessful.

On October 22, 2001, the Miami engineering firm of URS, Inc., put the OIG in touch with the San Francisco architecture and engineering firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, L.L.P. Skidmore representatives informed the OIG that Sergio Casas was in San Francisco and had asked the firm to advertise in a magazine that he was putting together in that city. They declined. No one at Skidmore retained Mr. Casas' telephone number or contact information.

V. ADVERTISERS' RELIANCE ON THE LETTERS

In Miami, Mr. Casas showed one or both of the MDAD letters of recommendation to several business people in order to win their confidence so they would buy advertising in his proposed magazine. After obtaining a copy of the magazine, the OIG contacted seven firms that advertised in its pages. Representatives from each company stated that they relied on the MDAD letters as an assurance that Mr. Casas and his magazine were legitimate. A pattern of conduct was discernible from this sampling of companies. Mr. Casas would request that the checks be made out to him personally. He would cash them at bank branches where the check accounts were held. Those checks that were instead made out to "*Viajes International*" were never cashed, indicating that Mr. Casas had no business bank account for his magazine.

Among the firms that Mr. Casas approached were:

- ❖ The engineering firm Bliss & Nyitray, Inc., of 51 S.W. Le Jeune Rd. The company agreed to take out a two-page advertisement in *Viajes*, and wrote a check from an account at Colonial Bank for \$1,000 dated August 28, 2000, made out to "Sergio Casas." According to President John Nyitray, Mr. Casas came to the firm and said he would give them a deal and charge only \$1,000 even though his advertising rate sheet states that a one-page full-color advertisement costs \$1,500. The check was cashed the next day, August 29, 2000, at a Colonial Bank branch in Coral Gables. (Exhibit 5)
- ❖ The engineering firm Zyscovich, Inc., at 100 N. Biscayne Blvd., wrote a check to Mr. Casas dated August 30, 2000, on an account at Union Planters Bank, to place an advertisement in his magazine. Mr. Casas offered the company a reduced rate of \$750 for a one-page advertisement. Again Mr. Casas requested that the check be made out to him personally. The check was cashed the next day at a Union Planter's branch office. (Exhibit 6)
- ❖ The aviation engineering firm DMJM Aviation, of Philadelphia, part of the Dade Aviation Consultants (DAC) consortium, wrote a check to *Viajes International* dated October 17, 2000, from an account in Nations Bank for \$600. That check was never cashed. (Exhibit 7)

- ❖ DAC Program Manager Mark Massman, of Bechtel Corporation, also met with Mr. Casas but declined to spend either DAC or Bechtel money on advertisements in *Viajes*. Both he and Mr. Christopher Allen allowed Mr. Casas to take their pictures for a page in the magazine that listed some of the DAC staff.
- ❖ The architecture, engineering, and interior design firm Bermello Ajamil & Partners, at 2601 Bayshore Drive, Miami, wrote a check to *Viajes International* (instead of to “Sergio Casas”) for \$1,000 dated November 7, 2000. This check was never cashed. (Exhibit 8)
- ❖ The firm CRA Clarke, Inc., of 7400 N. Kendall Dr., Miami, made two checks out to Sergio Casas. The first one, in the amount of \$400 from an account at SunTrust Bank, is dated February 19, 2001. It was cashed on February 20, 2001, at a Miami branch of SunTrust. The second check, in the amount of \$200 also from the SunTrust account, is dated March 4, 2001. That check was cashed March 7, 2001, at a Miami branch of SunTrust. (Exhibit 9 collectively)
- ❖ The URS Corporation, a San Francisco-based firm with a Miami office at 5808 NW 11th Street was also approached by Mr. Casas. The company wrote a check from a SunTrust bank account, dated May 7, 2001, for \$1,000, to Sergio Casas. The check was cashed on May 15, 2001 at a SunTrust branch office. (Exhibit 10)

These advertisers repeatedly told the OIG that they relied on the letters of recommendation as proof that Mr. Casas was legitimate. Mr. Nyitray, President of Bliss & Nyitray, which supplied the OIG advertisement with the Henderson letter, told OIG Special Agents that after seeing the letter, and given the fact that his firm had taken an advertisement out in the 1984 *Viajes* edition, he had no reason to suspect that Mr. Casas was not legitimate. Armando Trujillo, an architect at Zyscovich, recalled that he telephoned Mr. Henderson to verify the letter of introduction. Mr. Trujillo recounted that Mr. Henderson acknowledged meeting with Mr. Casas and giving him the letter of introduction. Based largely on that, Mr. Trujillo said his firm felt this was credible enough to give Mr. Casas a \$750 check for an advertisement. DMJM’s Mr. Allen stated that Mr. Casas persisted in approaching him at his office in the weeks prior to getting a check from the company. Mr. Allen stated that if it weren’t for the letter on MDAD stationery that Mr. Casas showed him, he would not have involved his firm. And URS Project Manager Andres Gutierrez recounted that he asked Mr. Casas for proof he was legitimate and was shown one of the MDAD letters. Mr. Gutierrez said that he had an assistant call the airport to confirm the letters. Mr. Gutierrez does not remember the name of the person his assistant talked to in the Department.

While the firms undoubtedly relied on the letters and at least one of the advertisers actually telephoned MDAD for verification, the companies should have never written the checks directly to Mr. Casas. It is highlighted that best practices would have required that the checks be made payable to the magazine. Two of the firms interviewed by the OIG did in fact make their check payable to *Viajes International*, and in their cases, the checks were never cashed.

VI. VERIFICATION OF LETTERS

While several firms said they called to verify the letters or called later with their concerns about Mr. Casas and his magazine, the first verifiable contact between a company and MDAD regarding *Viajes* was on October 16, 2000. Associate Director of Public Affairs Lauren Stover told the OIG that a tenant of Miami International Airport (MIA) called on that date to ask her about Mr. Casas and his letter of recommendation from Mr. Zuriarrain. The tenant asked if the letter meant that the MDAD wanted the tenant to contribute money to the magazine. Ms. Stover said she knew nothing about the letter or the magazine and asked the tenant to send over a copy of the letter. The faxed copy of the letter contains a date stamp of October 16, 2000, but does not identify the tenant who sent it. Ms. Stover does not remember the name of the tenant. She stated that she showed the Zuriarrain letter to Mr. Henderson who, according to her, replied that he had no knowledge of such a letter. Ms. Stover then told the MIA tenant that her office had no official dealings with Mr. Casas. At this time, Ms. Stover stated that she had no knowledge and was completely unaware of the Henderson letter.

The Zuriarrain letter came to Ms. Stover's attention again on or about May 4, 2001. On that date, Tom Murphy, Director of Business Development at Woolpert, 600 Brickell Avenue, Miami, a consulting engineering firm, told the OIG that Mr. Casas came to his office and showed him the letter signed by Mr. Zuriarrain. Mr. Murphy recalled Mr. Casas stating that the airport wanted all of its consultants to be involved in this project by buying advertisement space. Mr. Murphy said he did not trust Mr. Casas and that is what prompted him to contact Ms. Stover. At 1:41 p.m. on May 4, 2001, Ms. Stover emailed Vivian Robles, the Director's secretary. Ms. Stover wrote that she was concerned about the call from Woolpert. Ms. Stover's email noted *"When I asked Marc [Henderson] about it, he had no idea that his name was on a letter [the Zuriarrain letter] in circulation. He also said he never talked to Amaury [Zuriarrain] about this."* (Exhibit 11)

On May 16, 2001, Mr. Henderson sent an email to Ms. Robles in which he clarified *"Mr. Casas did approach me a year ago at the request of our Deputy [Zuriarrain]."* He added: *"I had little involvement beyond that since this was not a project of my division. Apparently, I have learned that a letter of introduction is in circulation and my name is on it [the Zuriarrain letter] as a point of contact. I was unaware of this until someone brought it to my attention."* Mr. Henderson added that he had received calls from various people who stated that Mr. Casas tried to pressure them into buying advertising space in his magazine, and that Mr. Casas requested airline tickets from United Airlines in exchange for advertising. (See again Exhibit 11) No one at United Airlines could confirm this allegation for the OIG.

The OIG interviewed Mr. Henderson on August 22, 2001, at his office at the MIA. Mr. Henderson initially represented not only that he didn't know that he was listed as the reference on Mr. Zuriarrain's letter, but that he had never written his own letter on behalf of Mr. Casas. When shown the letter he signed, Mr. Henderson acknowledged his signature and said he must have forgotten he wrote it. He still maintains he did not know about the second letter signed by Mr. Zuriarrain.

Mr. Henderson told OIG Special Agents that Mr. Casas was referred to him from Mr. Zuriarrain's office. He explained that Mr. Casas asked for a letter of introduction and showed Mr. Henderson the 1984 issue of *Viajes*. Mr. Henderson said he was inclined to write the letter because he believed it would be free, positive publicity for the airport. He said he did not ask permission from anyone before writing the letter and handing it to Mr. Casas. He said it is also possible that he gave Mr. Casas a list of companies doing business with MDAD.

Next, the OIG interviewed Mr. Zuriarrain on August 22, 2001, at his office at 5600 NW 36th Street. Mr. Zuriarrain explained that he had met Mr. Casas during production of the 1984 edition of *Viajes* and had not had any dealings with him since. He said no one called to refer Mr. Casas to him. According to Mr. Zuriarrain, he wrote his letter of recommendation at the request of Marc Henderson. On August 31, 2001, Mr. Zuriarrain retired from the MDAD after 27 years of employment with Miami Dade government.

On August 23, 2001, the OIG interviewed Ms. Stover in her office at MIA. Ms. Stover is the head of the Public Affairs division of MDAD. The division is responsible for developing public relations strategies for the airports in the county system and for developing promotional programs to increase awareness of the airports' facilities. Ms. Stover recalled Mr. Casas coming to her division and the matter being handled by Marc Henderson. She said that she had no knowledge of the Henderson letter, and when shown it by OIG Special Agents, stated that the letter must have been prepared at the direction of Mr. Zuriarrain. She stated that no one sought her permission, but added that she didn't think that Mr. Henderson would necessarily need her permission to write such a letter.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that Mr. Casas solicited advertisements for the magazine *Viajes International* based largely on the recommendation letter signed by two MDAD officials. At the time, there was a warrant out for Mr. Casas' arrest, resulting from allegations he knowingly proffered a bad check. Mr. Henderson and Mr. Zuriarrain based their written recommendation on the fact that this editor produced a similar magazine in 1984. The officials made no further effort to monitor the progress of the magazine or investigate its credibility. Companies that paid for advertising based their decision to do so largely on the MDAD letters. Neither MDAD nor those advertisers who saw the magazine are happy with its quality. Furthermore, the magazine may be operating in violation of Florida tax laws.

In addition, there are outstanding questions regarding the chronology of events Mr. Zuriarrain and Mr. Henderson describe. Mr. Henderson's lack of recollection about his involvement in this matter is troubling. Mr. Henderson said this was the first time he wrote such a letter of introduction on behalf of anyone. Despite the singularity of this task, he maintains he forgot that he wrote the letter. Mr. Henderson said he doesn't remember any of the advertisers calling him to verify he wrote the letter, despite at least one, Mr. Trujillo from Zyscovich, stating he did just that. And when suspicious advertisers called him about six months later, by Mr. Henderson's estimation, seeking Mr. Casas' whereabouts, this still did not jog Mr. Henderson's memory that he wrote a letter on behalf of Mr. Casas. Nor did their calls prompt him to alert his superior, Ms. Stover, about Mr. Casas and the advertisers' concerns. When Ms. Stover asked him if he knew about Mr. Zuriarrain's letter, this still did not prompt Mr. Henderson to remember that he wrote the original letter on behalf of Mr. Casas. And it is not clear if Mr. Henderson approached Mr. Zuriarrain on behalf of Mr. Casas for the second letter.

Ms. Stover only learned of the magazine when concerned businessmen twice contacted her, once in October of 2000 and again in May of 2001. Given that the MDAD is now trying to prevent the distribution of *Viajes*, even Mr. Henderson concedes that he should have alerted his superiors when the first calls came in months ago.

Currently there are no written guidelines regarding MDAD Public Affairs officials writing letters of introduction or endorsements on behalf of private businesses.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to maintain the integrity of the Public Affairs Division and the MDAD as a whole, a written policy should be instituted requiring due diligence to insure the credibility of any business seeking a letter of recommendation or introduction. For instance, a minimum background check should be done to make sure the business is legitimate – including contacting references, reviewing incorporation paperwork, and reviewing the company's tax identification number.

The OIG requests MDAD to respond to the aforementioned recommendations and any other actions that is being taken in reference to this matter. Please provide your response to the OIG by December 28, 2001.

APPENDIX

1. Advance notification letter addressed to Mr. Amaury Zuriarrain – former employee from MDAD.
2. Response from Mr. Zuriarrain.
3. Advance notification letter addressed to Mr. Sergio Casas. – **No response received.**
4. Advance notification letter addressed to Mr. Marc Henderson. – **No response received.**
5. Advance notification letter addressed to Ms. Lauren Stover. - **No response received.**
6. Advance notification letter addressed to Ms. Angela Gittens. - **No response received.**

cc: Ms. Katherine Fernandez Rundle, State Attorney
Eleventh Judicial Circuit, Miami-Dade County

Mr. Jim Zingale, Director
State of Florida Department of Revenue

Clerk of the Board (copy filed)