

The Works

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Frank Kruesi Doesn't Do Diplomacy

That offer of cheap bus fuel from **Hugo Chavez** might have gone over a lot better if Kruesi had mentioned it to anyone else at the CTA.

By Ben Joravsky

On January 4, Chicago Transit Authority president Frank Kruesi called a press conference to announce that the CTA had decided to reject Citgo's offer of a discount on fuel for its buses. Kruesi said the \$15 million proposal was doomed because Citgo was offering the wrong kind of fuel. "If we accepted this proposal, we would not be able to run reliable transit service," Kruesi told reporters. "Our buses would be stranded all over the region, and we would be doubling our emissions in the buses that use it."

Problem was, apparently Kruesi was using the royal we. Though it sounded like he was speaking for the CTA, in fact neither the CTA board nor its chair, Carole Brown, knew that he'd been entertaining an offer from Citgo for several weeks. "The board found out about the

details of the offer by reading them in the newspaper, like everyone else," says CTA board secretary Greg Longhini.

The offer was part of a recent effort by Venezuela to share a fraction of its oil wealth with the poor in the United States. Putting aside the question of whether Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez is just looking to embarrass President Bush, \$15 million worth of free gasoline isn't chump change. It represents a little less than a third of the CTA's escalating annual fuel budget, and it comes at a time when the agency desperately needs all the cash it can get—the CTA is nearly bankrupt, as Kruesi repeatedly reminds riders. Most recently, it took a last-minute bailout by the state legislature and a 25-cent fare hike to avert Kruesi's proposed layoffs and service



LAURA PARK

cuts. Even with the extra millions supplied by the state, it's only a matter of time before the

CTA faces another budget crisis, in part because of skyrocketing gas prices. A

multimillion-dollar offer probably should have been considered by its policy makers.

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You're in a jam, buddy. No matter how bad things get, no matter what happens in the next three years, you can't resign your office. If you do, your father will tell you that you really are a crybaby, mama's boy just like he has been telling you all of your life. He will also point out that Bill Clinton didn't resign even after all that was done to him. Your father would tell you that you should be more like Bill Clinton. (It seems like Clinton is already sitting in your chair at the Bush family dinner table.)

You are in for a rough ride these next three years, Mr. President. You are not used to having difficulty in your life, but difficulty is all that you are going to have in your life for the next three years.

One more thing, Mr. President, as of 10:15 PM CST, January 8, 2006:
From Iraq: American soldiers 2,193 killed, 16,239 wounded.
From Afghanistan: American soldiers 265 killed, 675 wounded.
Other Allied Soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan: 263 killed, unknown number wounded.

Just remember, President Bush, no matter how many brave soldiers are killed and butchered in your war, you won't be one of them.

Signed: Michael Foley January 8, 2006
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Boutique of the Week

"Frank reversed everything," says Jacqueline Leavy, executive director of the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group, a watchdog organization. "By law, the board members are the decision makers at the CTA. Frank Kruesi works for them—he's paid staff—not the other way around. If the

says Ocasio. "Frank didn't come to the meeting—no one from the CTA attended, which was a little surprising since the offer was for them."

At that meeting—attended by Ocasio, 19th Ward alderman Virginia Rugai (chair of the City Council's energy committee), and a representative of the

tration officials, who might retaliate by cutting Chicago's federal transportation funds. "He said, 'I don't want to take the risk of accepting \$15 million here and losing \$30 million from the feds,'" says Ocasio. "He was very definitive about it, very certain." But Ocasio researched the matter and discovered that the Bush administration had not opposed Citgo's offers in other cities. "Citgo is an American company," State Department spokesman Adam Ereli told reporters at a December 8 press briefing. "They're helping Americans in need. That is a good thing. That is as it should be." (Actually, though the company's still based in Houston, Citgo's been owned by Venezuela since 1990.)

When a reporter asked if the administration "objects to various politicians at local and state levels making their own deals for such discounted oil," Ereli responded, "Local politicians do what local politicians do—they help their constituents. . . . We don't see this as a political issue. We don't see this as an issue that concerns the U.S. and Venezuela. We see this as an issue of an American company helping American people, which is good and right and proper."

Ocasio says he sent Kruesi a copy of Ereli's statement, then followed up with a phone call. "I said, 'Frank, everyone's getting stuff—New York, Maine, Massachusetts,'" says Ocasio. "He said, 'I've been on the Internet, and it's only being done with community organizations, not governmental entities.' I told him, 'No, San Francisco's making a request.' He said, 'But their fuel is dirty fuel. It burns too much emissions.' I said, 'But we don't

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The multimillion-dollar offer represents a little less than a third of the CTA's escalating annual fuel budget, and it comes at a time when the agency is nearly bankrupt. It probably should have been considered by its policy makers.

board doesn't know about the offer, they can't realistically put their budget together."

Citgo initially extended the offer in mid-October as part of informal discussions with 26th Ward alderman Billy Ocasio and Congressman Luis Gutierrez. "They said they were making record profits because of the spike in gas prices after Hurricane Katrina and they wanted to give something back," says Gutierrez. "In New England and New York they were offering heating fuel. That wouldn't work here because we use a different type of heating fuel. Billy and I thought about gasoline for buses. It made sense because the CTA was talking about going broke."

Ocasio says he called Kruesi and invited him to a meeting in late October with representatives from Venezuela and Citgo. "Frank said, 'I'm willing to listen to a proposal, but I will feel very uncomfortable sitting at a table with someone from the Venezuelan government,'"

city's Department of Environment—Citgo officials got a little more specific, says Gutierrez. "They said they would give us up to \$15 million in savings by selling us fuel at 60 cents on the dollar—a 40 percent reduction—on 7.2 million gallons of diesel fuel for buses."

In early November, Ocasio says, he called Kruesi again. "I invited him to another meeting, on November 4, to discuss the offer," says Ocasio. "This time he came."

Citgo and Venezuelan officials did not attend this meeting. "I met with Frank and Alderman Rugai and the commissioner of the environment and I laid out the offer," says Ocasio. "Frank said, 'That's a very generous offer, but I don't want to get involved in foreign policy.'"

According to Ocasio, Kruesi felt that if the CTA took Venezuela's money, it would anger congressional Republicans and Bush adminis-



Kristen Skordilis

Koros Art + Style

Is West Lake Street going the way of New York's meatpacking district?

Though until recently its next-door neighbor was a bakery equipment shop, the block where six-month-old luxury boutique Koros Art + Style is located is getting dotted with Range Rovers rather than forklifts. Inside, the cavernous space resembles a church—perhaps dedicated to

the Greek goddess of extravagant joy from which the shop takes its name—with soaring ceilings, iron chandeliers, and antiques that include a wooden altar from London and a set of six sinks from a convent, now used to display denim. Owner Kristen Skordilis offers a

rigorously edited collection of quality basics, party frocks, and high-end accessories like sleek, sculptural clutches of laminated wood by Tivi. A pair of super-flattering black Alvin Valley trousers will set you back \$242, though Skordilis makes the case that unlike the four pairs of black pants that never leave your closet you'll actually wear these. There are also floaty kimono tops and caftans in watery green, blue, and purple prints by Mustique-based designer Lotty B. and luxurious Creo Care hair products. Skordilis goes out of her way to make customers feel welcome, offering glasses of wine to browsers and inviting them to events featuring the artists whose work she exhibits in the front of the store. —Heather Kenny

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have to use that kind of fuel. Citgo said they're willing to make a swap—trade their fuel for the kind you use.' But I never heard from him, and I began to think he's just looking for reasons to turn Citgo down."

By now it was the end of December, and Ocasio and Gutierrez had to get back to Citgo with some sort of response. "I don't want to start a new year with a fight," says Gutierrez. "But we got \$15 million on the table for a transit company that's raising fares and Kruesi's saying no? We got to fight."

So they asked state reps and aldermen to attend a press conference, demanding that the CTA at least meet with Citgo. It wasn't hard finding politicians willing to attend. "I like Frank all right," says Gutierrez, "but Frank can be—oh, how do I say this without getting into even more of a fight?—sort of arrogant to people."

On January 4 they held their press conference, with white, black, and Hispanic politicians coming in from all over the city

to take a few swipes at Kruesi. "I can assure CTA management that they will not be well received in Springfield as we prepare the 2007 budget," said north-side state rep Larry McKeon. "When you come with your hat in your hand, there better be a check for \$15 million in it," added south-side state rep Marlow Colvin.

A few hours later Kruesi called his own press conference, echoing the dirty-gas argument he had earlier made to Ocasio. "When I heard him talking about dirty fuel, spewing emissions, I thought, 'Cute, Frank's now an environmentalist—he's playing the environmental card,'" says Gutierrez. "But the thing is, Billy had already told him that Citgo was willing to swap fuel."

After news of the dueling press conferences broke, a new character entered the fray—CTA board chair Carole Brown. "I was intrigued to learn from media reports about your interest in helping to reduce the impact of high fuel costs on CTA customers," Brown wrote in a January 5 letter to Venezuela's consul general here. "As you

know, the dramatic increase in fuel prices has exacerbated CTA's structural funding shortfall. In 2006 CTA was forced to budget \$48 million for fuel purchases, compared with just \$12.5 million in 1999. I would be interested in learning more about your thoughts on ways to help ease the burden these higher costs place on the CTA and its customers. I look forward to hearing from you."

Gutierrez and Ocasio say they were surprised to read Brown's letter. "Could this be possible?" says Gutierrez. "Did the president of the board really learn about the offer by reading the papers? Did Frank keep the board in the dark?"

The answer is yes: Kruesi never told Brown or the other board members about the offer, much less his meeting and phone calls with Ocasio. "The first Carole ever heard of [Citgo's offer] was when she ran into [22nd Ward alderman Ricardo Munoz] in her gym sometime in November," says Longhini. "Munoz didn't have any details, just the vague idea. Then the matter came up at an

internal meeting with staffers on December 9. Again, there were no details offered—it was mentioned in passing at a meeting dealing with other matters. After that she didn't hear about it until she saw it in the newspapers."

The blindsiding illustrates the reality of sitting on a public board. By law, board members are supposed to make policy. In real life the Daley administration expects them to keep a low profile and do what they're told.

"I guess Frank decided that he's the man—he doesn't have to tell the board anything, not even about a \$15 million gift," says one CTA insider. "The board was really pissed. We'd like to look as though we know what's going on around here. The fact is, this doesn't make our jobs any easier. We need money, and now we have state reps like Larry McKeon saying, 'Don't bother coming to Springfield.'"

There may yet be a happy ending. After Brown wrote her letter to the consul, Kruesi started singing a different tune. On January 6 he attended a meeting

arranged by Ocasio with Citgo and Venezuelan officials. Afterward he told reporters he thought the CTA might be able to work out a deal.

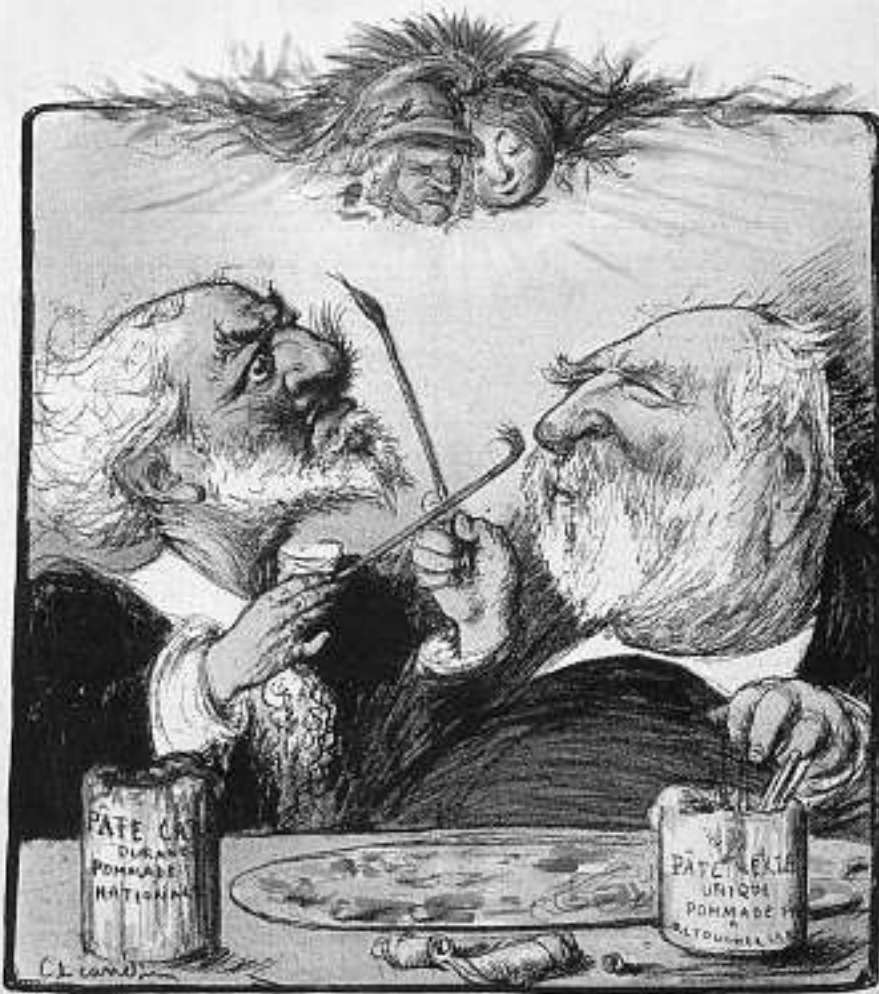
Citgo officials say they're meeting with the CTA to iron out logistical problems. "There's a lot of details aside from the gas swap," says another board insider. "We have to make sure that the feds sign off, and we have to see that it doesn't affect our funding from the Regional Transit Authority. Of course, we have to figure out how to make the \$15 million translate into lower fares for low-income riders. None of these are insurmountable, but I wish we had the full agency working on this back in October, when it was first offered."

Gutierrez says he's learned a lesson. "We went to Frank with the offer because we figured, you know, he's the guy who runs the day-to-day, he gets things done—the executive would consult with the board," he says. "We never thought he wouldn't tell anyone about the offer. In the future, we'll just call Carole." ■

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Chicago Antisocial

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Reader revelers (top left and adjacent); birthday love and . . . treats

director, innocently washing her hands. I'd taken the bait, but I didn't feel that foolish—at one *Reader* party I actually witnessed illicit substances and near-fornication in the loo. Another year my then-boyfriend tried to get an employee's wife to give him a blow job in a stall. At still another party I came dangerously close to making out in public with a coworker. In fact, there were two years when people told me they weren't bringing dates specifically so they could hook up with colleagues.

This year's bash seemed far more innocent—possibly because no one had told the newbies to leave their significant others at home. Highlights included the Magic Fork, which, if held in one's left hand while bowling, was believed to guarantee a strike; newly hired editor David telling our boss, Alison, after the open bar closed, to “buy [him] a drink, bitch,” then challenging her to a drinking contest; music editor Philip bringing his very own bowling ball (it even has a name: the Hammer of Bill).

The veterans seemed disappointed by the excessive restraint. “I keep waiting for the next generation to step up,” said a member of the editorial staff who'd rather not be identified by name. “I've done my part with the inappropriate making out in the past.”

Afterward, I headed to a birthday party in a cement-floored hovel inside a Garfield Park warehouse. (I won't name the birthday boy so he doesn't get in trouble with his landlord.) Like the *Reader* party, it was loads of fun for no good reason.

The place looked like Santa's psychedelic workshop: Christmas lights, troll dolls, and manly tools were strewn over tables, benches, and utility cabinets full of hardware. On a counter near the door, platters of cheese cubes and julienned vegetables surrounded a big pink ham that had been ripped apart Ren-faire style. A four-foot stage bounced as several young ladies danced on it to bad 80s music.

I joined the dancing girls, and after a few songs I felt like Jennifer Grey in *Dirty Dancing*. “Ready?” I asked my boyfriend, who was standing on the floor and couldn't see very well, as he was wearing a friend's glasses. He looked at me, which I took to mean yes, and I took a running start into what I imagined was a graceful leap into his arms. I belly flopped onto him, knocking him backward into some filing cabinets and onto the floor, cracking the back of his head on the keg.

We got up and took inventory: I had a giant welt on my hip, my right hand was puffy and sore, and my pants were ripped in the ass; Ringo had a matching hip welt, a cut above his right eyebrow, and scratches down his back. “What were you thinking?” he asked me. I struggled to find an answer. **B**

Shopping: the Antidrug

High on Handbags, Bowling, and Dirty Dancing

By Liz Armstrong

I couldn't wait for last Thursday to end so I could go home, lie down, and think about what I'd just done. I felt like I'd entered a place from which I would never be able to return. My life had changed irreversibly, and not necessarily for the better.

End-of-season designer clearance sales are a dizzying reversal of fortune, like when the guy who dumped you and broke your heart and whom you've finally gotten over starts drunk-dialing you every night, begging you to take him back. That camel-colored woven-leather Bottega Veneta bag that used to mock you from inside the glass case at Neiman's is sitting in a bin with the rest of the unwanted, a red line across its price tag. It's no longer too good for you. Now it needs you.

Still drunk from the \$2.50 well drinks at Club Foot the night before, I came unglued on the Gold Coast. First I found a zebra-print Moschino suit in my size at Field's, marked down 80 percent.

Never mind that I rarely have occasion to look that grown up—I had to have it. I rode the momentum of that purchase into the quiet, imposing Yves Saint Laurent shop on Oak Street. The ash-blond saleswoman took one look at my corduroy jeans, thrift-store necklace, and greasy hair and could barely mask her disgust.

That's when I saw it: a black suede tasseled handbag that made me shiver with desire. No other purse has ever made me feel so vulnerable, so desperate. I entertained visions of myself at exclusive, arty affairs, wearing my zebra suit, fancy bag in one hand, extra-dirty martini in the other, pinky erect. I'd impress my new friends with some wild but charming story and they'd throw their heads back and laugh heartily. “Oh, go on,” they'd urge. And I would.

The saleswoman cleared her throat. “It's been marked down twice,” she said. My heart started pounding and my arms went numb; I was sweating through my top.

Leaving the store with a giant white shopping bag with the letters YSL printed in elegant black type, I felt way too conspicuous, like when I was 11 and had just frenched a boy for the first time. I'd walked home as fast as I could and shut myself in my room, paranoid that my parents would be able to tell what I'd done just by looking at me.

Reality came crashing down the next day, when the most glamorous event on my schedule was taking place at a bowling alley. The annual *Chicago Reader* staff party, which always happens after the holidays, was held at Lincoln Square Lanes, a kick-ass old-fashioned establishment located above a hardware store.

Most staff parties are heavy-boozing free-for-alls designed to shame employees into not wanting to talk to one another for another year. But we at the *Reader* have no shame. There is no dress code here and no hygiene code, nor do there seem to be strict rules of conduct.

(Proof: I still have a job.)

By the time I got to the party, more than half the staff was bowling, and nearly everyone, including the supposedly reformed, was puffing away, determined to suck down as many cigarettes as possible before the ban took effect.

In the middle of the bar/lounge area a wobbly table was piled high with stacks of white pastry boxes. Music writer Jessica Hopper was attacking them like a vulture, pulling out sesame ball after croissant Lorraine and shoving them in her mouth, trying to gross people out. It was working. “These are really good for the skin,” she said, squeezing out the bean paste from a sesame ball—it looked like coagulated blood—and rubbing the oil into her hands.

Someone—I wish I could remember who—told me people were doing coke and having sex in the bathroom. I ran into the ladies' with my notepad and was greeted by our human resources

ANDREA BAUER