



SENATOR JAVIER SOUTO
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MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor Carlos Gimenez
Fr: Commissioner Javier Souto
Re: Budget Cuts in the MDPD Auto Theft Division
Date: March 14, 2012

I am shocked to learn through the media that there are plans to eliminate the Multi-Agency Auto Theft Task Force at the Port of Miami.

I am not certain you remember that in the mid-1990s Miami was recognized as the auto theft capital of the world. We were the subject of exposes and news reports on national programs like 20/20, Dateline, 60 minutes and many others. It was so bad that somebody would order a certain model of a car on a Monday morning, and by Thursday there was undercover news footage showing the vehicle stolen in Miami being driven on the streets of Panama, Colombia, Venezuela or somewhere in Latin America. According to the latest news, this seems to be happening again, and now people are getting killed.

I invited then Sergeant Tom Gross to one of my town meetings at the West Dade Regional Library to address rampant auto thefts throughout our community, including Westchester, Kendall and Hialeah. I committed to him that I would do everything in my power to help him

with this issue. In those days an average of 40,000 cars a year were stolen in Miami-Dade County.

At the time, I had been investigating the miss-appropriation of funds at the Port of Miami by the former Director Carmen Lunetta. There was a U.S. Customs inspection station to inspect vehicles being shipped abroad at the Port. The Multi Agency Auto Theft Task Force comprised of the Metro-Dade Police Department, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, City of Miami Police Department and U.S. Customs used this facility. Carmen Lunetta had an employee with a desk at this facility charging \$10 in cash for every vehicle exported abroad. He had created his own tax to sustain his own slush fund, which was not authorized in the County budget or by any County Ordinance. I confronted him, the Budget Director and the County Manager with regards to this illegal \$10 fee, and in the end this \$10 fee for certificate of right-of-possession inspection was formally adopted as part of the County Budget, and I directly earmarked half to fund the operations of the Multi-Agency Auto Theft Task Force and the other half to fund the operations of the Port. My staff, Sergeant Tom Gross, and I, spent almost a year meeting with the shipping industry (freight forwarders, custom brokers, shippers, exporters and auto dealers) to convince them to agree to tax themselves in support of the Multi-Agency Auto Theft Task Force Operations, for the good of the community. In addition, I obtained the funds to purchase a hydraulic lift to facilitate the inspection of the undercarriage of the vehicles by law enforcement, so that they could check the serial numbers, etc., easily. I also obtained state and federal grants to install the first "gamma ray" machines at a Port Facility in the State of Florida. I did this in spite of the truckers protesting that they were going to get cancer by having their cargo containers scanned to detect stolen vehicles not listed in the manifest, plus money, weapons and drugs. Sergeant Gross became a Lieutenant and soon was promoted through the ranks to Police Major. Lieutenant Gregory Terp, who took over the Multi-Agency Auto Theft Task Force also rose through the ranks to Police Major. The task force made a major impact on the ability of auto thieves to export stolen cars from our Port or the Miami River. Soon most of the stolen vehicle industry shifted to Port Everglades and the vehicle thefts in Miami-Dade County plummeted. Florida was recognized internationally with the best anti-vehicle theft law enforcement task force in the nation, along with cutting edge, innovative technology in preventing auto thefts. The "gamma ray" machines were subsequently adopted by almost every important port in the State of Florida.

As we saw by the violent auto theft and shooting reported in the news this week, the elimination of the Multi-Agency Auto Theft Task Force will lead to the resurrection of the high rates of stolen vehicles in our community to proportions that we have not seen in over a decade. The consequence of this simple action will be that Miami-Dade will once again reclaim the title of the "Stolen Car Capital" of the entire world and car insurance will be once again one of the most expensive in the nation. The Mafias will rule once more. The image of Miami-Dade County will go down-the-drain again. Here we go again...