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INSIDE

NATION, 5A

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METRO & STATE, 1B

DID HOMES TRUMP SAFETY?

PLANNERS SAY HOMESTEAD DWELLINGS WERE APPROVED DESPITE EVACUATION FEARS

TROPICAL LIFE, 3E

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TODAY'S HIGH 84 | LOW 72

● Bryan Norcross' forecast, back of Section B
● Online: weather.herald.com

INDEX

ACTION LINE.....9B	FLORIDA.....1B
AMERICAS.....12A	FOOD.....7E
CLASSIFIED.....3F	LOTTERY.....10B
COMICS.....23E	MOVIES.....4E
CORRECTIONS.....3A	NATION.....3A
CROSSWORD.....27E	PEOPLE.....4A
DEATHS.....6B	TELEVISION.....25E
DILBERT.....3C	WEATHER.....9B
EDITORIALS.....32A	WORLD.....24A

WILMA'S AFTERMATH



CARL JUSTE/HERALD STAFF

NO MORE HOME: John DeBlase stands near the wreckage of his houseboat community in North Bay Village. 'It's the end of a chapter in my life,' he says of the way he's lived for 30 years.

Last Days of the HOUSEBOAT

South Florida's few houseboat communities are on the verge of sinking after Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma dealt severe blows to the final holdouts of a colorful lifestyle.

BY AMY DRISCOLL
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John DeBlase spent 30-odd years living the South Florida houseboat scene, part *Surfside 6*, part *Rat Pack*, with a bit of fictional detective Travis McGee thrown in for color.

Back then, colonies of floating homes thrived in places such as North Bay Village, the Miami River and across from the Fontainebleau. Swanky or sleazy, they beckoned rich and poor alike with a siren song of a swinging life under the stars — a little racy, a little outside the mainstream, the ultimate affordable home with a glorious view.

But pollution, zoning and hurricanes have taken a hard toll on the tropical dream. Houseboats have



THE WAY IT WAS: South Florida has always been a magnet for floating homes.

dwindled and nearly disappeared from the waterfront as condo towers crowd out the sky. Only a handful of holdouts remained in North Bay Village — and then came the hurricanes.

● TURN TO HOUSEBOATS, 17A

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Guards slammed for playing game

■ A lawmakers' panel learned that youths were locked in their rooms at the Miami-Dade detention center so guards could play basketball.

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER
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Guards at the Miami-Dade juvenile jail wanted to play basketball

with their Broward counterparts, but there was a problem: Who would keep an eye on the inmates?

They came up with a novel solution: Put the kids in lockdown — an extraordinary move usually employed in emergencies — and head for the hardwood.

Wednesday, angry Florida lawmakers asked the state's embattled

juvenile-justice chief to investigate the May incident.

"I certainly hope we get to the bottom of this," said Rep. Frank Peterman, a St. Petersburg Democrat. "This is discouraging... very, very disturbing."

During the lockdown, a youth

● TURN TO GAME, 30A

VENEZUELA

Chávez oil diplomacy attracting new friends

■ Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is using oil to expand his influence around Latin America.

BY STEVEN DUDLEY
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CARACAS — While Cuban leader Fidel Castro tried to export his revolution throughout Latin America in the 1960s with AK-47s, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is fighting to expand his "21st century socialism" with oil barrels.

Flush with huge profits from high petroleum prices, Chávez has offered cheap

crude and refineries to neighbors, bought up some of their bonds and offered cash aid for development programs in a bid to unify the region around his ideology.

"I think that we Caribbean and Latin Americans need to think about, when the North American empire crashes, what comes next for us," a confident Chávez told delegates from the Caribbean during the October launch of PetroCaribe, an arrangement to send Venezuelan oil to those nations.

● TURN TO CHAVEZ, 2A

ON TO WORLD CUP!



RABIH MOGHRABI/AFP-GETTY IMAGES

Trinidad and Tobago's Stern John triumphantly holds up his nation's flag after his team defeated Bahrain 1-0 in Manama, Bahrain, on Wednesday to qualify for the World Cup finals for the first time. **Story, 9D**

EDUCATION

Sweet drinks banned at Dade schools

■ With childhood obesity a hot issue in education, the Miami-Dade School Board voted to ban the sale of soda and other sweet drinks on campuses.

BY MATTHEW I. PINZUR
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Soda and other sweet drinks will no longer be sold in Miami-Dade County public schools after a unanimous School Board vote Wednesday that brings the district in line with many other large, urban districts.

Carbonated beverages will be removed almost immediately. By next summer, the only drinks sold on campus will be water, milk, unsweetened fruit juice and some "electrolyte-replacement" drinks such as Gatorade.

The new rule also bans "king-size" snacks such as oversized cookies and large bags of chips.

The only dissent came from the board's nonvoting student representative, Arielle Maffei.

"Some days we do need that perk, that caffeine," said Maffei, a senior at MAST Academy on Virginia Key. "Having that choice to have water or soda is that student's choice."

She also pointed out that bottled water and juice are more expensive than soda.

But with childhood obesity a vogue educational issue, school systems from New York to Los Angeles have

● TURN TO DRINKS, 10A

BROWARD COUNTY

Town CEO vanished — and so did money

■ The state is seeking the arrest of Davie's chief executive on charges he embezzled more than \$360,000 from the town. But first it has to find him.

BY NIKKI WALLER
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Charming and politically astute, Chris Kovanes rose through the ranks of Davie bureaucrats to become town administrator, earning \$154,000 a year. That's a big salary to run a relatively small town, but if what authorities say is true it wasn't big enough to suit Kovanes.

The 34-year-old Kovanes, suspended from his job since Oct. 18 and now officially a fugitive from justice, was charged Tuesday with felony counts of organized fraud, grand theft and money laundering.

A warrant obtained by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement says he plundered more than \$360,000 of taxpayer money by creating a shell company to which he funneled more than 20 town of Davie checks over the past year and a half.

● TURN TO FRAUD, 2A

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VENEZUELA

Chávez's oil diplomacy is attracting new friends

*CHAVEZ, FROM 1A

Chávez may be underestimating the future of the "empire," and not everyone seems to be signing on to his revolution. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe and Mexican President Vicente Fox — who recalled his ambassador from Venezuela this week in response to a similar move by Chávez after the two exchanged words about economic policy during this month's Summit of the Americas — seem to be emerging as the United States' strongest allies.

How much sway Chávez gains and maintains with the countries that receive his largess will also depend on his own staying power at home, the future price of oil and U.S. policies.

BOLIVAR'S DREAM

But that has not stopped the Venezuelan president from offering his help around the region while pushing to revive the dream of his hero, Simón Bolívar, the 19th century soldier who led a region from Peru to Venezuela to independence from Spain but then failed in his efforts to keep it unified as one nation.

"We are prepared to go little by little towards integration, a union so that we are stronger, and to march forward, as Bolívar says, towards the prosperity of our people," Chávez told the leaders of the Caribbean.

His efforts to export his ideology recall campaigns by Castro, Chávez's political mentor, to export his revolution with armed groups to Latin America in the 1960s and '70s. But while unconfirmed Ecuadorean intelligence reports have alleged that some 20 Latin Americans received guerrilla training in Venezuela earlier this year, Chávez is more openly using his oil wealth to win influence over the region.

PetroCaribe, a pact between Venezuela and 14 Caribbean nations, will provide cheap financing for oil purchases, to be repaid over 25 years. Venezuela also pledged \$50 million for social programs in the Caribbean.

In addition, Chávez is pushing forward PetroAmérica, a Latin America-wide arrangement that could include swapping human resources like doctors for oil and natural gas. As part of the deal, the Venezuelan leader says he'll invest \$2 billion to expand refining capacity in Jamaica, Cuba and Uru-

VENEZUELA'S OIL PROFITS WIN IT FRIENDS

Rich with windfall profits from high oil prices, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is offering cheap crude and financing for refineries to neighbors, buying up some of their bonds and offering them cash aid for development programs in an effort to unify the region around his ideology.

- HONDURAS**
In September, Honduran President Ricardo Maduro asked to join PetroCaribe.
- NICARAGUA**
Venezuela has expressed interest in helping the Nicaraguan Mayor's Association refine petroleum products at a discounted rate.
- DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**
Venezuela announced it would increase oil sales from 24,000 barrels per day to 50,000 barrels per day.
- JAMAICA**
Venezuela pledged to finance the upgrade of a refinery of the Jamaican state oil company, PetroJam, to double its capacity.
- BRAZIL**
Venezuela and Brazil have said they will build a refinery in northeastern Brazil at a cost of \$2.5 billion.
- URUGUAY**
Venezuela sent 5 million barrels of oil to Uruguay; the two countries are discussing a joint venture to explore Venezuela's Orinoco Basin as well as a possible expansion of a refinery in La Teja, Uruguay.
- ARGENTINA**
Venezuela has purchased \$650 million in government bonds.
- ECUADOR**
Venezuela offered a zero-interest loan to help the country recover from a strike that shut down domestic oil production; the two countries are also discussing building a refinery in Ecuador.
- COLOMBIA**
Colombia and Venezuela signed an agreement last June to build a \$150 million natural gas pipeline to export natural gas to Asia and the U.S. west coast.

S. RIEPE / HERALD STAFF, KRT

OIL DIPLOMACY

These are Venezuela's regional oil deals

- **PetroAndina** (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia)
- **PetroSur** (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay): These countries could be recipients of generous oil and natural gas deals as well as financing for upgrading and building refineries.
- **PetroCaribe**: A deal with 14 Caribbean nations to finance oil deals at low interest rates over 25 years.
- **PetroAmérica**: Possible deals between Venezuela and several oil producing and refining countries to receive oil at discounted rates; some payback could come in the form of human resources such as doctors.
- **Cuba**: Venezuela also provides Cuba with upwards of 80,000 barrels of oil per day at preferential prices.

guay, and has spoken of joint ventures to build refineries in Brazil and Ecuador.

PetroSur — which involves Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Venezuela — and PetroAndina — with Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela — are both in motion to round off the PetroAmérica family.

Chávez also is seeking agreements between nations, most of them involving oil or oil money — deals to buy bonds and petroleum loans, for example — and even attempts to forge accords with like-minded municipal leaders. In Nicaragua, for example, Chávez has proposed oil sales at below market price to an association of mayors controlled by the leftist Sandinistas.

LIKE JFK

"What Chávez is doing is

no different than what [President John F.] Kennedy tried to do [in the 1960s] and what the [U.S.] Agency for International Development does all the time: He's trying to buy influence," said Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a Washington think tank often critical of U.S. policy on Latin America.

Chávez's plans for regional unity around his side of the political spectrum is running headlong into the Bush administration's policies. U.S. officials have branded the Venezuelan president a destabilizing influence in the region, but he remains popular with many of its residents.

"What has happened is that the Bush administration is on a major offensive to discredit Chávez," Birns added. "But it's the Bush administration policy, not Chávez, that really

is isolated."

Chávez has fought back and regularly chastises the United States as "imperialist."

Chávez's search for regional influence already has had some impact. U.S. officials privately complain that his warm relations with the 14 Caribbean countries swayed some of their votes in the 34-member Organization of American States.

OAS LEADER

The Caribbean members, for example, joined Chávez in opposing the U.S.-backed conservative candidate for the post of OAS secretary general, former Salvadoran President Francisco Flores. Flores eventually withdrew and Chile's José Miguel Insulza was elected.

"He's ... castrating the OAS," said retired U.S. Ambassador Myles Frechette, a Latin American specialist now in private consulting.

But Frechette and other analysts say it may not be so easy for Chávez to maintain his new alliances, especially if a drop in oil prices hurts his foreign assistance plans and perhaps even his chances of holding power at home.

What's more, Frechette says that Chávez, with his aggressive anti-Americanism and still undetailed brand of socialism, may not be as appealing to his neighbors as he thinks — and some U.S. officials fear.

BROWARD COUNTY

Warrant issued for vanished official

*FRAUD, FROM 1A

The warrant comes a month after the Davie Town Council suspended Kovanes with pay, after FDLE opened investigations into allegations of financial misconduct and illegal pornography.

Both investigations will continue as Kovanes is sought for arrest, said FDLE Assistant Special Agent in Charge Michael Mann, who is overseeing the case.

On Wednesday, the Town Council decided to deposit Kovanes' paychecks into an escrow account, which would revert to the town if he is convicted. Council members also appointed assistant town administrator Ken Cohen to serve as acting town administrator, and gave him a temporary \$30,000-per-year raise.

Kovanes had been seen as a conciliator who could unite people of opposing viewpoints. But on Wednesday, council members said they felt betrayed.

"I'm devastated by this whole thing," said Councilwoman Judy Paul. "I put a lot of faith in Mr. Kovanes, and I thought I was a good judge of character."

His \$154,000 salary was one of the largest for an administrator in Broward County, but the town's population has grown dramatically

in recent years, surpassing 80,000.

Still, Davie retains a homespun country flair. Town Hall is still a western-themed building beside a rodeo ground, and some residents still own horses and attend town meetings in cowboy hats and boots.

Kovanes was reported missing to the Broward Sheriff's Office last month, but since FDLE declared him a fugitive BSO said it will not pursue Kovanes' missing-person case.

Mann said a representative of the Law Enforcement Against Child Harm task force — known as LEACH — is helping with the pornography investigation.

FDLE used sworn testimony and bank records to persuade a judge to issue an arrest warrant for Kovanes.

Bank records subpoenaed by FDLE show that between January 2004 and October of this year Kovanes deposited 20 checks into the bank account of a supposed town contractor called Geographic Environmental Origin Inc.

State business records show the company, known as GEO, was established in December 2003, with Kovanes listed as president.

Mann said Wednesday that more charges may be forthcoming, but FDLE, worried

Kovanes would flee after Davie leaders suspended him, worked quickly.

"After the township meeting it became apparent he had abandoned his position, so we hurried to get the first phase of the investigation completed," he said.

What remains unclear is how Kovanes escaped notice for so long.

In sworn testimony, Davie Procurement Manager Herbert Hyman told investigators he chastised Kovanes in 2004 for awarding no-bid contracts to GEO.

Hyman said Kovanes often requested checks be cut quickly and given to him to hand-deliver to GEO. Hyman and other town staffers said GEO never seemed to produce any work.

Last month, Hyman said his boss, Davie Budget Director Bill Underwood, approached him with concerns about Kovanes' connection to GEO after the town administrator requested a check for \$55,000.

Underwood then learned Kovanes was president of GEO. He went to Davie Police Chief John George and Mayor Tom Truex, who called an emergency town meeting to suspend Kovanes for the duration of the investigation.

Underwood was out of town attending a conference

Wednesday and unavailable for comment.

The charges against Kovanes raise grave concerns about Davie's financial checks and balances.

"We have some weak spots that need to be looked at," said Truex. "An appropriate bid process is one in which no one person can corrupt the system. There should be checks and balances where no one person could commit the crimes that are alleged."

Kovanes was named town administrator in April. He became interim town administrator last year, when his predecessor, Tom Willi, took a job as Monroe County Administrator. Before that, Kovanes served as the town's special programs administrator, where he oversaw geographic information and mapping efforts.

Willi, who was Kovanes' boss when the alleged theft began, could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Ernesto Cespedes, the attorney representing Kovanes' ex-wife Denise in the couple's divorce case, said she was "shocked" to learn how much her spouse allegedly stole. Last month, she told police Kovanes had said he feared for his life.

Herald staff writer Wanda J. DeMarzo contributed to this report.

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