

## CapitoLink: Jewish Illinois representatives visit Cuba

By Suzanne Strassberger



Pictured from left: Ill. Rep. Karen May; Esther Schrager, Feigenholtz's cousin; Adela Dworin, president of Temple Beth Shalom of Havana, Cuba; Ill. Rep Sara Feigenholtz; and David Prinstein, vice president of Havana, Cuba.

Illinois Reps. Sara Feigenholtz, Jack Franks, and Karen May joined nine other state legislators on a State Trades Mission to Cuba in September. “Under Gov. Ryan, Cuba imported agricultural products from Illinois valued at \$650 million dollars a year; now the trade down to about \$70 million,” said Franks, who chairs the International Trade and Commerce House committee. “We wanted to find out why and what we could do to correct it so that there are more jobs for Illinois workers.”

The legislators paid their own way because they were interested in increasing trade with Cuba. Cuban government leaders told the mission that the United States is no longer financially competitive with other food-exporting countries such as Vietnam and Brazil. Franks thought that one explanation is the current federal policy which forbids ships from the United States from importing directly to Cuba. This forces American businesses to work through a third party. Cuba imports most of its food. Good relations between Illinois farmers and Cuba could benefit both groups.

Feigenholtz and May slipped away for a visit with Adela Dworin, president of Temple Beth Shalom of Havana, Cuba, and David Prinstein, vice president of the temple. Knowing how isolated the Jewish community of Havana is from Jewish supplies of any kind, Rep. Feigenholtz brought *tallit* (prayer shawls), *kippot* (yarmulkes), and Shabbat, *Havdalah*, and Chanukah candles. Both representatives also brought medical and health care supplies which is in short supply throughout Cuba. "I was awed by this Jewish community of only 500 families. They struggle to keep Jewish tradition alive in Cuba, observing the holidays and Shabbat in spite of tremendous economic pressures." Feigenholtz said. One topic on the minds of all three Jewish legislators was that of Allan Gross, an American Jewish contractor, sentenced to 15 years in prison for crimes against the Cuban State for distributing satellite telephone equipment to Jewish groups in Havana. When asked if he had the opportunity to express the concerns of the Jewish community in Illinois about Gross to government leaders, Franks responded that as, co-chair of the mission, he wanted to stay focused on the core goal of increasing trade. He also noted that he felt the diplomatic work being done on behalf of Gross should be left to the professionals as the situation is very delicate. Franks added that their trip coincided with that of Bill Richardson, former governor of New Mexico, who was in Cuba specifically to seek the release of Gross.

Dworin, in a recent email to Feigenholtz, described her visit, along with Prinstein, to see Gross on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. "According to his own words, and as we could appreciate, his physical state is good and he receives excellent medical attention," wrote Dworin. The three of them enjoyed honey cake baked by several members of the Cuban Jewish community.

In November, Franks will return to Cuba with his extended family on a humanitarian, rather than trade, mission. They will bring medicine, health care products, and supplies for the Jewish Youth Center in Havana. Herb Franks, Rep. Franks' father, traveled to Cuba seven years ago on a mission which included stops with the Jewish community in Cuba and began to think then of a return trip as a family mission.

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