

The Dallas Morning News

Watchdog raises questions about Craddick expenses

Office says chartered plane, Lithuanian trip for wife are legitimate

12:00 AM CDT on Tuesday, March 18, 2008

By EMILY RAMSHAW / The Dallas Morning News
eramshaw@dallasnews.com

AUSTIN – House Speaker Tom Craddick used campaign funds to charter a private plane in Aspen, Colo., and to bring his wife along to a conference in Lithuania, according to an ethics complaint being lodged against him this week.

Although the expenditures are probably legal – the chartered plane carried the Craddicks to a lawmaker's funeral, and the conference was a gathering of state legislative leaders – watchdogs say that at the least, they appear excessive.

At most, they argue, spending \$13,500 on a private plane in Aspen and \$1,800 for Nadine Craddick's commercial airfare to Lithuania constitute personal expenses, not professional ones.

"To me, it shows a total lack of scruples," said Dave Palmer, who analyzes the campaign finance spending of officeholders across the country for his California-based Web site noethics.net. "How do you justify spending these outrageous amounts of money? And if you're really representing the people, then why aren't you doing their work?"

Alexis DeLee, a spokesman for the speaker, said Mr. Craddick's expenditures were perfectly legitimate. When state Rep. Glenda Dawson died in the fall of 2006, she said, Mr. Craddick was unable to find a commercial flight, and had to charter a jet from Aspen to Houston for the funeral.

"Given the circumstances of their location and Representative Dawson's untimely death, that was the only way the speaker and Nadine were able to get to the funeral," Ms. DeLee said.

And she said Mrs. Craddick went to Lithuania to participate in the State Legislative Leaders Foundation conference, not simply to escort her husband. Mrs. Craddick attended every meeting and event at the conference, Ms. DeLee said.

"The law is very clear that elected officials can use their own campaign funds for travel that is related to their official duties," she said. "It is also proper and legal for an official's spouse to accompany and assist in such duties."

Ethics watchdogs question that interpretation. In particular, they said, it's unclear why a conference in Lithuania falls under official duties. And they raised doubts about the difficulty of finding a commercial flight from Aspen to Houston in September – hardly the middle of ski season.

The Texas Ethics Commission will consider Mr. Palmer's complaint and issue an opinion on whether any campaign finance rules have been violated. In the past, the commission has ruled that lawmakers can spend political contributions on a spouse's travel, if the travel is for official state business. And while the commission has ruled that using campaign funds to travel to family funerals is not permissible, that opinion doesn't seem to apply to lawmaker funerals.

Andrew Wheat, who monitors the influence of money in politics for the group Texans for Public Justice, said the expenditures may not violate ethics laws. But he noted that when Gov. Rick Perry and an aide flew to Istanbul last year, their airfare cost a combined \$7,000 – almost half what the Craddicks paid to fly to the funeral.

"The Ethics Commission rules don't put a particular limit on how much you can pay for a plane ticket," Mr. Wheat said. "That said, this does appear to be off the charts."
