



Trip to Aspen leads to ethics complaint

by **Troy Hooper**, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

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Memo to current and would-be politicians: Vacationing in Aspen? Don't screw the taxpayers.

Yet another high-ranking politico is in hot water after taking a chartered jet out of la-la land in the Rockies.

Tom Craddick, Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, found himself the target of an ethics complaint after he spent approximately \$13,500 in campaign funds to charter a jet from Aspen to Houston to attend the funeral of a Houston lawmaker. The amount of the expenditure is not in question, but it has ruffled feathers in the Lone Star State, where an ethics complaint against the embattled Speaker was filed.

"To me, it shows a total lack of scruples," said Dave Palmer, a California-based ethics crusader, who filed the complaint. "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?"

This isn't the first time a politician has been caught in a financial Aspen scandal. Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kansas) canceled a ski junket to Aspen in 2001 after critics accused him of wasting taxpayer dollars, and U.S. Army Secretary Thomas White also drew ire in 2002 after he used a military jet so that he and his wife could close the sale on their three-story house in well-heeled Aspen.

While government watchdogs like Palmer contend that Craddick's expensive flight from Aspen to Houston was excessive, his public-relations team stands firm that there was no wrongdoing.

Spin doctors for the embattled Republican point out that the flight expense doesn't appear to have broken any laws, and that the chartered jet morphed into a necessity when the congressman was unable to book a commercial flight from Aspen to attend Texas Rep. Glenda Dawson's funeral.

"Given the circumstances of their location and Rep. Dawson's untimely death, that was the only way the Speaker and Nadine (Craddick's wife) were able to get to the funeral," read a statement Craddick's press liaisons e-mailed to the Aspen Daily News on Wednesday.

The Texas Ethics Commission has indicated it will consider Palmer's complaint and issue an opinion on whether Craddick violated any campaign finance rules. But the rules appear to be thorny.

In the past, the Texas Ethics Commission has ruled that lawmakers are permitted to spend political contributions on a spouse's travel if the travel is for official state business. But here's where it gets dicey:

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, according to experts in Texas.

Whatever the case, the high-cost travel has caught the attention of the media and Craddick's political adversaries, some of whom are his fellow Republicans. Even though Craddick was re-elected with a 12-vote margin to begin the 2007 legislative session, the Speaker's own lieutenants in the GOP have reportedly turned against him, citing his alleged authoritarian ways and democratic skirting.

"The Ethics Commission rules don't put a particular limit on how much you can pay for a plane ticket," explained Andrew Wheat, who monitors the influence of money in politics for a group called Texans for Public Justice.

"That said, this does appear to be off the charts."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

hoop@aspdailynews.com
