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Vet's ethics crusade targets Texas lawmakers, judges

He files complaints, and criticizes Whitmire for using campaign funds for sports tickets

By **GARY SCHARRER**

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AUSTIN — A California disabled veteran who spends six days a week sifting through campaign finance reports has filed complaints against 10 Texas legislators and 15 judges with the Texas Ethics Commission, ranging from failing to identify campaign donors to using campaign money for personal use.

One of the complaints takes aim at state Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, for dipping into his massive campaign chest for \$165,061 worth of Houston Astros, Texans and Rockets tickets — expenses the veteran says personally benefit the senator.

"Does every voter get a free ticket to the ballgame?" wonders Dave Palmer, who filed the complaint. "It's a wonder that the Astros don't ask him to call balls and strikes."

In his campaign finance report, Whitmire says the expense was necessary for "constituent entertainment."

Whitmire said he often gives some of his sports tickets to firefighters and police officers or other supporters who otherwise might not get a chance to attend.

Whitmire also said he wants to be seen supporting Houston's pro teams and routinely has opportunities to attend the games as guests of others. On Thursday, he attended the Astros game at Minute Maid Park with a guest and gave his seats, which are behind home plate, to firefighters.

He discounted Palmer's complaints.

"It's a total non-issue by some character out in California, so I don't care what he thinks," Whitmire said Monday when the commission received Palmer's complaints.

Taking a constituent to a ballgame paid by campaign funds could be an appropriate expenditure, said Tim Sorrells, spokesman for the Texas Ethics Commission.

ETHICS CONCERN

A California man filed ethics complaints against 10 legislators and 15 judges from Texas after reviewing campaign finance reports. The complaints range from misusing campaign funds for personal use, such as paying for gifts and tickets to sporting events, to failing to name a donor's employer or occupation as required by law.

Legislators

- Rep. Warren Chisum, R-Pampa
- Rep. Garnet Coleman, D-Houston
- Rep. Yvonne Davis, D-Dallas
- Rep. Gary Elkins, R-Houston
- Rep. Charles Howard, R-Sugar Land
- Rep. Carl Isett, R-Lubbock
- Rep. Craig Eiland, D-Galveston
- Rep. Joe Crabb, R-Kingwood
- Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston
- Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas

Judges

- 134th District Judge Anne Ashby, Dallas
 - 151st District Judge Caroline Baker, Houston
 - 55th District Judge Jeffrey Brown, Houston
 - 10th Court of Appeals, Thomas Gray, Crawford
 - 12th Court of Appeals, Leonard Davis, Tyler
 - 61st District Judge John Donovan, Houston
 - 129th District Judge Grant Dorfman, Houston
 - 197th District Judge Migdalia Lopez, Harlingen
 - 133rd District Judge Lamar McCorkle, Houston
 - 98th District Judge Jeanne Meurer, Austin
 - 34th District Judge William Moody, El Paso
 - 101st District Judge Jay Patterson, Dallas
 - 1st Court of Appeals Sherry Radack, Houston
 - 313th District Judge Pat Shelton, Houston
- Source: www.noethics.net

"If it's to benefit himself or family and absent a candidate or office holder role, it would not be proper," Sorrells said. "But the statute does allow someone to make an expenditure that's related to candidate office holder activity."

The commission generally makes a case-by-case decision on such complaints, which could take months, Sorrells said. The agency can levy fines up to \$5,000 per violation or triple the amount at issue.

Whitmire has nearly \$3.5 million in his campaign fund. The veteran politician buys four season tickets for Astros and Texans games and two season tickets for the Rockets from his campaign fund, he said.

Most of Palmer's complaints accused the legislators and judges of not fully identifying major campaign contributors. Other complaints accused them of using campaign funds for personal travel, leasing cars and gift-giving.

One complaint included an image of a clown to poke fun at an Austin state district judge for taking \$1,449 in campaign money to buy an evening gown for an awards banquet. Using campaign money on clothing considered "dual purpose attire" is inappropriate, Palmer said in his complaint against 98th state District Judge Jeanne Meurer.

"Unless Jeanne purchased a clown suit, then this expense is a total sham," Palmer wrote.

The judge said she's "heard the clown description before in response to my clothing sense."

"But heading short-notice to a statewide formal gala honoring me, I knew I needed to show up in something more than black robe or business suit. Thus, the sequins," Meurer said.

Meurer said she's worn the gown to "so many public events and made so many presentations in that outfit that I'm sure my supporters are saying Bozo needs something new to wear."

But she offered an apology if she offended anyone for using campaign money to buy it.

Palmer's complaint also takes issue with a state district judge in Dallas for pulling \$1,830 from a campaign account to preside over "the renewed wedding vows" of an unnamed couple in Las Vegas.

State District Judge Anne Ashby said she believes the trip was an appropriate use of campaign money.

"I renewed wedding vows for supporters who have been significant in my political career," she said. "My husband paid for his own transportation and other expenses."

Palmer's complaint against Whitmire also accuses the senator of not fully identifying major campaign contributors by not including the donor's occupation and employer. The requirement became law in 2003 for those who contributed at least \$500. Whitmire has failed to fully identify more than 250 supporters whose contributions amounted to more than \$400,000, Palmer said.

Whitmire said he was unaware of the requirement and will instruct the person who prepares his reports to amend them.

Palmer, who lives in Folsom, Calif. said he began investigating judicial misconduct in 1995 based on personal experience in Ohio. He said he invests much of his time looking at campaign finance records to expose officials who he believes are playing fast and loose with the rules.

gscharrer@express-news.net

Reader Comments relating to Watchdawg

sternfielding wrote:

Thank you, Mr. Palmer. [You are doing a great public service for all of us.](#) Keep up the work and pressure.

bobinhouston wrote:

"It's a total non-issue by some character out in California, so I don't care what he thinks," Whitmire said. Well I live here in Houston and I care. [Can we make Palmer an honorary Texan?](#)

dontaseme wrote:

Whitmire, this should get you recalled even if he is not a citizen: "I don't care what he thinks," Whitmire said. Renting a gown like that? She can go to a thrift shop and buy 5 great gowns to keep for that. [I hope he keeps it up and it gets more news.](#)

texastwin wrote:

"It's a total non-issue by some character out in California, so I don't care what he thinks," Whitmire said Monday when the commission received Palmer's complaints

[Thank you to that "some character out in California" for being diligent and unbiased.](#) Whitmire's attitude suggests that he thinks he doesn't have to explain anything to anyone, UNLESS it's one of his own voters. Sorry, I don't buy that and I don't care where the info comes from, as long as someone points it out.

Txeng45new wrote:

Sen. John Whitmire should be ashamed. This is not his money to do whatever he wants. These politicians, democrat and republican, are nothing more than criminals in my opinion, for doing this.

[Thanks for the vet for bring this to light.](#) Unfortunately public officials are too corrupt to get any change.

buzzm1 wrote:

Round up their email addresses and phone numbers and get on them about it!!

[Three cheers for Dave Palmer.](#) Hopefully the newspapers will help him by publicizing all of his findings. Politicians need their feet to be held to the fire!!

KwikCroc wrote:

[Good work Mr. Palmer. Keep it up.](#)

buzzm1 wrote:

Felton is just over the hill from me; [I'll have to look up Dave Palmer and high five him.](#) [We need more dogs to sic on the politicians;](#) they get away with murder.

vpdriver wrote:

One of the sadder commentaries out of this story is that it took a lone disabled vet, halfway across the country, to bring this to light.

Great job Chronicle, journalistic watchdog of Houston!!! What's the point of going to court, fighting for public access, etc., if your not going to avail yourselves of these tools? Local TV news is worse!

In other news ...it is raining in Houston! More at 10.

smittyjs wrote:

If there were only more citizens like this there would be less politicians like Whitmire, who "doesn't care what he thinks."

I bet that there are a few people struggling to make ends meet that would like to have \$165,000 for what amounts to pocket change for Sen. Whitmire.

WhoopTeDo wrote:

We need more people like this guy. These politicians are living off their campaign money. No mystery there.

leonar18 wrote:

Kudos to you "California Man."

twobe wrote:

"I renewed wedding vows for supporters who have been significant in my political career," she said. "My husband paid for his own transportation and other expenses." You would think the judge would be embarrassed to say this, you would think.

My hat is off to the Veteran. Most people in the state house run for the purposes of promoting their own agenda and benefiting their own pockets.

I am perplexed there are only 10 names on the legislative side though. He must have missed some.

...and for those egotistical, self serving lawmakers, it is not ok as far as I am concerned when you use your war chest funds on the likes of season tickets, renewing vows and other idiotic things. Why don't you send some of your constituents who can't afford electricity, medicine or food some of your \$. You make laws that cripple people and have the audacity to think someone is not looking over your shoulder, I don't care what your party is.

Hopefully more names will come out.

sandy4u wrote:

I like the fact that his filings are unbiased. If folks start to take this serious enough, then maybe "The Whitmire's of the world" won't be so gung-ho to fight for the job. I often wondered what would make a person lay their book of life on the table for all to see, to get a certain job. Me personally, wouldn't want all the attention and ridicule that comes with such a visible position. I wouldn't want anyone seeing me behind "home plate", with a bunch of constituents.

Reader Comments relating to Watchdawg

Stansensei wrote:

Ah, the voice of a public servant. "I don't care what he thinks," Whitmire said.

BagA1999 wrote:

Don't let up. There's lots more to this story. From my observation, most politicians think they are above the law.

cousin_it wrote:

Whitmire has been accepting "retainer fees" from businessmen in exchange for favorable representation in the Texas legislature for as long as he's been in office. The system is broken and the average guy on the street has no representation in Austin or Washington D.C.

artemusgordon wrote:

"I don't care what he thinks," Whitmire said.

Whitmire is right. He doesn't have to care, because most of us don't either. Most of us don't vote. I'll bet that ninety percent of Whitmire's constituents couldn't identify him as their state senator. Most have probably never called his office or written him a letter. Most incumbents get re-elected, regardless of whether they are corrupt or incompetent.

We get the government we deserve.

trinity71645 wrote:

Tip of the iceberg. They have been using campaign money as their own personal piggy banks for years.

Finkle wrote:

Is there such a thing as an honest politician? I'd like to know.

7/8/2008 1:36 AM CDT

bummer40 wrote:

Gee, Whitmire "represents" me. I wonder if I could score some tickets to an Astros game sometime in the near future. Whatta I gotta do, just give him a call and identify myself as a constituent? Behind home plate yet, he must really want to impress us poor ole JSPs

redcougar wrote:

What difference does it make where the information comes from. Is it true? Is it accurate? If it is true and accurate, and a violation of campaign rules, then it should be exposed as such. A crook is a crook no matter what label he or she wears. We the people let politicians run all over us. We have only ourselves to blame.

high wrote:

I am a voting constituent of John Whitmire but I didn't know he was supposed to entertain me.

TexasJusticeDotOrg wrote:

Heck, you should see Whitmire's (little Napoleon) food bill at classy Houston and Austin restaurants with the justification of a "meeting." The guy ought to weigh 500 pounds as much as he eats. Spends plenty on gasoline as well.

Calif. vet files complaints against lawmakers

Associated Press - July 8, 2008 6:15 AM ET

AUSTIN (AP) - A California veteran has gone to the Texas Ethics Commission with complaints against 10 state lawmakers and 15 judges.

Dave Palmer, who lives in Folsom, Calif., said he began investigating judicial misconduct in 1995 based on personal experience in Ohio. He said he invests much of his time looking at campaign finance records to expose officials who he believes are violating the rules.

State Sen. John Whitmire, from Houston, is among those Palmer has filed an ethics complaint against. Palmer said the senator personally gained from using funds from his campaign chest for \$165,061 worth of Houston Astros, Texans and Rockets tickets.

The Houston Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News report Whitmire said yesterday that it's a total non-issue by some character out in California, so I don't care what he thinks -- end quote.

Palmer's complaint against Whitmire also accuses the senator of not fully identifying major campaign contributors by not including the donor's occupation and employer.

Whitmire said he was unaware of the requirement, which became law in 2003, and will instruct the person who prepares his reports to amend them.

