

Houston Chronicle

Commission fines legislator for campaign reports

By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN Associated Press Writer

Dec. 29, 2008, 12:39PM

McALLEN, Texas — A South Texas legislator under investigation for his air travel and land holdings has been fined by the Texas Ethics Commission for improper accounting on campaign reports.

State Rep. Kino Flores, D-Palmview, said Monday he had already paid the \$1,100 fine from campaign funds. The fine is unrelated to the investigation by Travis County prosecutors.

The commission released a finding Dec. 18 that said there was evidence to show Flores improperly registered reimbursement payments to staffers for things such as a parade float and "Christmas party music." The payments totaled more than \$7,700 in campaign reports filed in 2006, 2007 and 2008, according to the commission report.

On Monday, Flores gave the example of a float he ordered for the Mission Citrus Parade. He said he recorded a reimbursement payment to a staff member in a lump sum, but the commission wanted him to list the individual vendors that money was used to pay.

"They wanted an itemized list that I didn't have," Flores said. Flores filed corrections to the reports in October.

The Travis County District Attorney's Office began investigating Flores over discounted air travel he allegedly received from the LaMantia family, which owns a South Texas Budweiser distributorship, and widened to include Flores' land holdings.

Flores acquired his Rio Grande Valley ranch from two convicted drug dealers. Flores recommended one of them, Roel Benavides, for a job with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. The TCEQ forced Benavides to resign in August after discovering he had lied about his criminal past, agency employment records show.

Travis County prosecutors in Austin have the authority to investigate allegations against state officials.

The commission also fined another South Texas legislator for not reporting key identifying information for some campaign contributors. Rep. Rene Oliveira, D-Brownsville, left out the occupations and employers of several contributors who gave him \$500 or more in 2006 and for the 2008 Democratic primary. He was fined \$3,000.

"It was a series of record keeping errors that were made unintentionally and in haste," Oliveira told the Brownsville Herald in a prepared statement released Sunday. "The reports were corrected within 14 days of this being brought to my attention, and I can assure you that my future reports will meet all requirements."

The investigation stemmed from a complaint filed in February by Dave Palmer, an ethics watchdog in Folsom, Calif., who filed complaints against numerous Texas officials.
