

San Antonio Express-News

Wentworth spending is criticized

Gary Scharrer - Austin Bureau

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AUSTIN — An ethics complaint filed against state Sen. Jeff Wentworth alleges the San Antonio Republican has used nearly \$1 million in campaign funds on personal expenses, including \$124,702 for luxury car leases, \$102,010 on exotic travel and \$18,211 for gatherings at an exclusive men's club near San Francisco.

The expenses over a seven-year period through 2007 had nothing to do with political campaigns or officeholder duties, as required by law, but "everything to do with having a good ol' time at the expense of his constituents," Dave Palmer of Folsom, Calif., said in a complaint delivered Friday to the Texas Ethics Commission.

Palmer said by phone he is a disabled veteran living on a pension. He styles himself online as "the Watchdawg."

Wentworth said he could not comment on the complaint until he saw it but categorically denied using campaign money improperly.

Complaints to the Ethics Commission are confidential unless a ruling is issued.

Wentworth is not the only legislator to use campaign funds for private club memberships, luxury automobile leases or travel. State law bars politicians from converting their campaign donations to personal use, but the definition of a legitimate political expenditure is broad.

Campaign finance reform advocates say such spending looks improper.

Palmer considers Wentworth's use of campaign money for repeated trips to the Bohemian Grove, a 2,700-acre campground owned by a private San Francisco art club, to be the most egregious example of inappropriate spending.

Only male members are allowed into the club, according to the complaint.

"The entertainment is expensive, including an elaborate Grove Play known as 'High Jinx' where female roles are played by men (members) in drag," the complaint states.

"Unless the state of Texas or San Antonio is paying (Wentworth) to dress up in drag, I don't know how that can be an official duty," Palmer said by phone Friday of the senator's Bohemian Grove-related campaign expenses.

Commenting on the club two years ago, Wentworth told the Express-News: "It's not something I'm supposed to talk about. But if I had to put words to it, I'd say it's a music camp for old men."

Palmer's complaint also lists \$124,702 in lease payments on Lexus and Infiniti automobiles — an average cost of nearly \$1,500 a month for seven years.

"It would be frivolous for Wentworth to claim that he never used either of these luxury vehicles for personal use," it states.

Wentworth learned of the complaint from a reporter and declined to comment on specific allegations until he reads it.

"I could respond ignorantly, uninformed and unintelligently, but that's not my style," he said. "I haven't read it. I haven't seen it.

"I have not broken any law," Wentworth added. "And every penny in and out of my campaign fund is perfectly legal."

In July, when the Express-News reported that Wentworth had spent \$20,308 between January and June 2007 to lease a Lexus, Wentworth said the campaign Lexus was in keeping with the kind of cars he drives in his personal life. He said it was necessary for the dangerous stretch of Interstate 35 between San Antonio and Austin.

"It's a matter of safety," he said at the time.

Palmer listed dozens of trips Wentworth has taken to such places as Alaska, Puerto Rico, Turkey, Algeria, England and Japan. The complaint provides examples of what Palmer considers "outlandish lodging expenses" involving thousands of dollars at top-end hotels.

"He's going first class. It must be nice to be on somebody else's nickel to be traveling to so many exotic places," Palmer said.

The complaint also lists \$4,256 involving a condominium that Wentworth owns in Austin.

The Texas Ethics Commission recently fined former state Rep. Toby Goodman, R-Arlington, \$10,000 for alleged violations of a law against legislators using campaign funds to buy second homes.

The commission told Wentworth late Friday afternoon that it had not received the complaint. Palmer forwarded a copy of a U.S. Postal Service tracking record showing it was delivered a few minutes after noon.

State law prohibits anyone from converting a campaign contribution to personal use, defined as "a use that primarily furthers individual or family purposes not connected with the performance of duties or activities as a candidate for or holder of a public office."

Palmer estimates that he has filed about 300 ethics complaints against public officials in Texas, California, Florida, Michigan, Louisiana, Ohio and others.

"I'm just totally against people who claim to be serving the public interest when, in fact, they're serving their own personal interests," Palmer said.