

Landrieu Subject Of Complaints

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WASHINGTON - A government watchdog group filed complaints Tuesday with the Justice Department and Senate Ethics Committee against U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, claiming she steered a \$2 million schools contract to a campaign contributor six years ago.

The nonpartisan Citizens for Responsibility for Ethics in Washington, also known as CREW, said in the complaint that the Louisiana Democrat should be investigated over whether she committed bribery by accepting campaign contributions from the contractor.

The funding issue came to light last month, when The Washington Post reported that Landrieu directed the money in 2001 for the Voyager Expanded Learning literacy program for kindergartners and first-graders in the District of Columbia. One former school official told the newspaper the district had chosen a different reading curriculum.

Voyager's political action committee, executives, employees, their relatives and lobbyists have contributed \$80,000 to Landrieu, according to campaign finance reports cited by the newspaper.

Landrieu, who sits on the Senate Appropriations Committee, served as the ranking Democrat on the District of Columbia subcommittee at the time. The schools contract was added in committee in what is known as an "earmark" - funding for specific projects that are requested by Congress members and that typically do not receive scrutiny.

Four days after Voyager's founder, Randy Best, held a \$30,000 fundraiser for Landrieu in his Dallas home in October 2001, the Senate approved the bill; however, Landrieu had submitted the funding request to the committee five months earlier, Landrieu spokesman Adam Sharp said Tuesday.

CREW, nevertheless, is taking aim at the series of events.

"Sen. Landrieu appears to have traded a \$2 million earmark for \$30,000 in campaign contributions," Melanie Sloan, CREW's executive director, said in a statement. "It was a win-win situation for Best and Sen. Landrieu but a lose-lose for the taxpayers and D.C. schoolchildren."

Landrieu, who was traveling Tuesday in Louisiana, could not be reached for comment. After an interview request to her, Sharp issued a statement calling the CREW allegations "frivolous."

Sharp also released a letter showing that the school district had requested money for the program six months before the Best fundraiser. The earmark was secured in committee a month before the fundraising event; full Senate approval came four days after the fundraiser.

Since the implementation of the Voyager program, literacy rates in the district have risen 11 percent, according to national assessments cited by Sharp. Another letter Sharp produced, from New Orleans school officials, praised the Voyager program three months before the D.C. funding was allocated.

Best, reached by telephone in Dallas on Tuesday, told The Associated Press that any suggestion Voyager improperly influenced Landrieu is "absolutely incorrect."

"My goodness, we never did anything that was even slightly improper," Best said.

He said the proximity in timing between the fundraiser and the earmark were "totally coincidental."

Best is no longer affiliated with the company. In 2005, he sold Voyager to Michigan-based ProQuest for about \$360 million, The AP reported Tuesday.

Best told The Post in its series of stories on District of Columbia schools that after an initial meeting with Landrieu on the reading program, somebody from Landrieu's office asked him to hold a fundraiser on her behalf.

"The political networking gives you access to tell your story," Best told the newspaper. "I think we had a pretty compelling story."

CREW asked the Justice Department to probe whether Landrieu committed bribery through the series of events. CREW cited federal law that prohibits public officials from directly or indirectly demanding, seeking, receiving, accepting or agreeing to receive or accept anything of value in return for being influenced in the performance of an official act.

The Supreme Court has determined that accepting a contribution to a political campaign can constitute a bribe if the contribution and official act can be proven to be related.

Best and Landrieu have said the two were unrelated. Several former D.C. school administrators told the newspaper the program did help certain students. Landrieu defended her support for Voyager on a New Orleans WWL-TV talk show broadcast Sunday.

"I was impressed with this program whether they ever contributed a penny to me," Landrieu is quoted on CREW's Web site as saying during the broadcast. "The program actually worked."

The ethics complaint may come to haunt Landrieu as she seeks re-election.

"Her career has been relatively scandal free, but the way she tried to blow this off was not well thought out," Louisiana pollster Bernie Pinsonat told The AP. "I've got news for her: It's going to be a big deal in her campaign unless she comes up with a better explanation."