

Ethics Group Targets Landrieu Earmark; Reading Program Donated To Campaign

BYLINE: BRUCE ALPERT, Times-Picayune

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 3

DATE: January 9, 2008

WASHINGTON -- An ethics watchdog group Tuesday asked the Justice Department and Senate Ethics Committee to investigate whether Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., violated federal bribery laws in getting a \$2 million earmark for a reading program whose executives and lobbyists donated to her 2002 re-election campaign.

The money was earmarked for a Washington, D.C., public schools reading program operated by Voyager Expanded Learning, a Dallas company then headed by Randy Best.

The request for investigations came from Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington via letters to the Senate Ethics Committee, the Department of Justice and the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Louisiana and the Northern District of Texas.

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

Officials at the Justice Department and Senate Ethics Committee declined to comment.

Reading scores rise

Landrieu spokesman Adam Sharp and Best said that Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington and The Washington Post, which first reported on the \$2 million earmark last month, had gotten some information wrong.

While CREW said Landrieu made the request for Senate financing on Nov. 6, 2001, four days after receiving \$30,000 in contributions from the company, Sharp said Landrieu had been working on getting the funding for months before the vote. He said the efforts were made at the request of Paul Vance, Washington's superintendent of schools at the time. Money for the program was included in a version of the D.C. spending bill reported out of committee Oct. 15.

The Post reported that the \$30,000 in contributions from Best and other Voyager executives came on or about Nov. 2, 2001, after an unnamed Landrieu staffer asked Best whether he would hold a Texas fundraiser for the senator.

"At the request of D.C. officials -- many months before the sequence of events CREW and The Washington Post so erroneously mischaracterized -- and based in part on the program's successful track record in Louisiana, Sen. Landrieu secured voluntary funding to make Voyager available to D.C. schoolchildren," Sharp said. He said the program helped raise reading scores in Washington by 11 percent and that Landrieu's support for the program had nothing to do with campaign contributions.

'Pay to play' questions

Best said "there was not the slightest inappropriate behavior in Voyager's or my dealings with Mary Landrieu.

"She visited Dallas and studied the program independently and talked to districts that used Voyager before supporting it," Best said. "The request for congressional support was submitted many months before a fundraiser."

Shannan Overbeck, spokeswoman for the current owners of Voyager Expanded Learning, said the company has a 90 percent renewal rate for its reading programs and thinks it win contracts "solely because our products work."

But Rebecca Fisher, spokeswoman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee, said the 2001 earmark for Voyager raises questions about whether it represented a "pay to play scheme."

"The question has been out there long enough; Louisianians deserve an answer, and Mary Landrieu should be well aware this isn't the last time she'll hear about this," Fisher said. The Republican Senatorial Committee has targeted Landrieu's re-election race this fall as a potential GOP gain.