

Group Files Ethics Complaint Against Landrieu

BYLINE: ANA RADELAT, Gannett News Service

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A government watchdog group has asked the Justice Department and the Senate ethics committee to investigate whether Louisiana Sen. Mary Landrieu traded favors for campaign cash in securing \$2 million for a program run by a campaign donor.

Landrieu, a Democratic member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, secured the money in 2001 to implement the Voyager Expanded Learning system -- a reading program for young children -- in schools in the nation's capital.

Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington says Landrieu may have violated federal bribery law by including the money -- known as an earmark -- in a spending bill just four days after receiving \$30,000 in campaign contributions from Voyager executives and their relatives.

Landrieu's press secretary, Adam Sharp, called the complaint "frivolous" and "wholly without merit."

He said Landrieu's efforts to secure funding for the Voyager system was based on her commitment to "seeking new, innovative approaches to educating our young."

The Justice Department did not return calls requesting comment. The Senate ethics committee does not comment on requests for investigations.

Melanie Sloan, CREW's executive director, said it's unlikely the committee will launch an investigation.

"It's very, very rare that the Senate ethics committee does anything about anything. But this is very, very bad," Sloan said.

The committee is made up of three Democrats and three Republicans and is headed by Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

CREW filed a complaint with the ethics committee last summer against Sen. David Vitter, R-Metairie. That complaint asked for an investigation into whether Vitter violated Senate rules because of his ties to a Washington escort service.

There's no indication the committee, which rarely makes its investigations public, has acted on that complaint.

CREW's latest complaint goes to the heart of how business is conducted on Capitol Hill, where access and favors are often preceded by campaign contributions.

The Republican Party, which hopes to defeat Landrieu in her bid for re-election this year, accused the senator of a "political pay-to-play scheme."

The founder of the Voyager program, Randy Best, had hired former Louisiana GOP Rep. Bob Livingston to help him lobby Congress for money for his program, according to a December story in The Washington Post. Livingston's efforts procured \$1 million in a House spending bill, but he was unable to secure money in the Senate, the story said.

CREW said Best hired another lobbyist who arranged a meeting between Best and Landrieu. Soon after, Best threw a fundraiser for Landrieu at his home in Dallas, according to The Washington Post story.

"Members of Congress need to understand that trading earmarks for campaign funds is illegal -- no exceptions," Sloan said.

Best said there was no link between Landrieu's offer of help and the fundraiser.

"There was not the slightest inappropriate behavior in Voyager's or my dealings with Mary Landrieu," Best said. "She visited Dallas and studied the program in depth and talked to districts that used Voyager before supporting it."

On Tuesday, Landrieu's office distributed an April 1, 2001, letter from Paul Vance, former superintendent of the Washington public school system, asking Landrieu and Sen. Mike DeWine, R-Ohio, former chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the District of Columbia, for money for the Voyager program.

As proof the Voyager program is in demand by educators, the office also distributed a 2001 letter from New Orleans public school officials to Landrieu asking for money for the program.