

Musgrove Defends Judicial Appointments; Feds Examining If Campaign Contributions Influenced Governor

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GULFPORT -- Gov. Ronnie Musgrove said Tuesday that character, not campaign contributions, determines who he appoints to fill state judicial vacancies.

Musgrove responded to a report Sunday in The Clarion-Ledger that federal investigators are examining whether campaign contributions influenced his judicial appointments. Musgrove said he has not been contacted by investigators, and that his appointments are aboveboard.

Scrutiny of the governor's campaign contributions is apparently part of a broader investigation into the state's judiciary. Federal and state authorities are trying to determine if lawyers paid off judges' personal loans in exchange for favorable rulings, sources close to the investigation say.

No one has been charged in connection with the investigation.

As governor, Musgrove appoints judges to fill vacancies in the state court system until elections are held.

Musgrove, who was in South Mississippi to announce the opening of a new industry, said he receives numerous requests and recommendations any time a state position becomes vacant.

"I look to select a person who will make a good judge or who will do a good job in whatever the position," he said.

The governor's office is bombarded with recommendations and self-referrals when there is an opening on the state court, Musgrove said.

According to Musgrove's campaign finance records, the governor raised \$921,776 in 2001. During that same year, Musgrove appointed two state Supreme Court judges and one Court of Appeals judge.

Biloxi lawyer Paul Minor donated \$27,125 to Musgrove shortly before Musgrove appointed Jim Brantley to the state Court of Appeals in August. Minor spoke at Brantley's swearing-in ceremony.

Minor, who did not return phone calls, is one of the lawyers who has been named in the federal and state investigation into the state's judiciary.

Musgrove denied that Minor, or anyone else, has ever influenced his decisions.

"Paul Minor has been a longtime supporter of mine as I have had longtime supporters all across the state, in all walks of life," Musgrove said. "He has voiced support, like hundreds of others. He, like many others, has been disappointed by my appointments."

Other attorneys also donated large amounts of money to Musgrove before appointments, including David Nutt of Jackson, who donated \$50,000 two days before Musgrove appointed Brantley. Crymes Pittman, a Jackson lawyer, donated \$30,000 in October to Musgrove's campaign, less than a month before Musgrove appointed James Graves and George Carlson to the state Supreme Court.

A banker, Bobby P. Martin of The People's Bank of Ripley, was one of the governor's largest contributors that year, donating \$75,000. He also donated money to the campaign before the judicial appointments.

Musgrove appointed Carter Bise, a Gulfport attorney, on Dec. 31 to the Chancery Court on the Coast. Bise donated \$500 to the governor's campaign shortly before he was appointed, campaign records show.

But Bise said he made the contribution on Nov. 27, before he knew there was an opening. Bise was a co-sponsor of a fund-raising event for Musgrove, but didn't attend the event because of a scheduling conflict.

"It was a reported contribution. I have a copy of the invitation. I have a copy of the canceled check," Bise said. "All this predated the public disclosure that Judge (Tom) Teel and Judge (J.N.) Randall Jr. were going to resign. I had no idea they were going to resign."

Teel and Randall resigned as Chancery Court judges in early December.

Many people have questioned the timing of the investigation, as it coincides with the state Legislature's debate over civil justice reform. Some of the people that have been named in the investigation are Democrats or longtime Democratic supporters.

"All I know is what I read in the newspapers," Musgrove said. "No one has contacted me. It certainly does appear to be a one-sided investigation. I always thought an investigation was supposed to be just that and not a one-sided public event."