

Plot alleged to elect 3rd-runway supporters - Election watchdog links businessman's \$49,000 with mayor

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Des Moines Mayor Don Wasson concealed \$49,000 in campaign contributions and expenditures aimed at reversing the city's opposition to a third runway at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) investigators have charged.

The campaign contributions were also intended to help a local businessman, Hank Hopkins, win a contract to haul roughly 15 million cubic yards of dirt to the runway-construction site, the PDC investigators alleged.

If accurate, the charges could lead to a fine or criminal charges.

The investigation alleges that Hopkins and Wasson, who denies the charges, were frustrated that a majority of the seven-member Des Moines City Council wanted to continue spending public money to fight a third runway. So they sought to elect candidates in the November 2001 election who would reverse the city's stance. And they succeeded.

Shortly after the election, new council members elected Wasson mayor, and on Dec. 19, 2002, voted to stop contributing to an anti-runway group, the Airport Communities Coalition. The vote was 4 to 3 on the measure that would have provided \$150,000 to the anti-runway fight in

2003.

The PDC investigation report, which Wasson received yesterday, claimed that the mayor initially denied receiving a check from Hopkins. However, when investigators showed a copy of the "check from Mr. Hopkins endorsed by Mr. Wasson, Mr. Wasson acknowledged that he did, in fact, receive the check," the PDC alleged.

In all, the PDC alleges that Hopkins contributed \$49,000, which was used to help elect Gary Petersen, Richard Benjamin and Maggie Steenrod to the City Council.

According to investigators, Wasson said he concealed the source of the campaign money because reporting contributions from Hopkins or his companies -- well-known supporters of a third runway -- "could have had an adverse impact on the election."

Under state law, such campaign spending must be reported to the PDC. None of the \$49,000 at issue was.

Some city residents have called for Wasson to resign.

"I've been involved in politics in Washington state for 19 years, and I have never seen anything like this," said former city councilman David Kaplan, who filed the complaint that started the PDC probe.

Wasson and Hopkins will have a chance to formally respond to the charges at a PDC hearing on Jan. 28. Hopkins was not available for comment last night. Wasson disputed the charges last night at a City Council meeting and read a statement proclaiming his innocence.

"The charges are completely unfounded and many of the facts are patently false," Wasson said.

Wasson declined to detail what PDC findings were inaccurate, saying "my lawyers told me to be careful."

The City Council meeting last night was packed with almost 100 spectators.

Councilman Bob Scheckler confronted Wasson. "You sold us all out," said Scheckler. "It appears in exchange for Mr. Hopkins' support, you'd do anything to be mayor, even going over to the side of the enemy."

Wasson sat silently while Scheckler, red-faced and shaking, leveled his criticism.

Jeanne Moeller, a longtime resident, said Wasson's mayoral ambitions were long-known.

Moeller said Wasson and Hopkins "left a trail like an elephant with a bloody nose in the snow."

Kaplan, who lost his council seat to Petersen by 230 votes in the 2001 election, said he became suspicious because Benjamin, Petersen and Steenrod appeared to have campaigns that were extraordinarily sophisticated for Des Moines.

In fact, Dan Sherman, who lost his seat to Benjamin by 17 votes, said that the \$49,000 contributed by Hopkins was more than the six candidates' combined reported spending in the race for three council seats.

Benjamin, Petersen and Steenrod denied having any connection with the alleged Wasson and Hopkins scheme.

For many years, officials at the Port of Seattle have proposed constructing a third runway at Sea-Tac, a project that is in litigation over the permits needed to proceed. Port officials have determined that more than 17 million cubic yards of fill must be brought to the site before building the runway.

Since 1993, the city of Des Moines has opposed expansion of the airport. In 1997, the Wescot Company, owned by Hopkins, first proposed building a conveyor system that would be used to move the fill to the runway, according to the PDC.

The PDC said Wasson "was tired of always being on the losing end of 6-to-1 council votes and that during the 2001 election he wanted to work for candidates who would support him in trying to change the policies of the city of Des Moines."

According to political consultant Tom Hujar, "Wasson recruited some council candidates and wanted those candidates to win in the hopes of (his) becoming mayor of Des Moines."

Des Moines was scheduled to give \$150,000 to the anti-runway coalition in 2003. Led by Wasson and supported by the three candidates he and Hopkins allegedly helped to elect, the council voted Dec. 19 to stop funding the coalition.

"The election a year ago completely turned the council from one direction to another," said Stuart Creighton, chairman of the Airport Communities Coalition, which has spent as much as \$1.5 million a year to fight the third runway.

Wasson maintains that he opposes the third runway. But he said the expensive battle had become futile.

"It's a slight contradiction to state that you're opposed to a third runway yet deny the coalition the ability to fight it," countered Creighton.

Kaplan said Wasson should resign. Kaplan also thinks Wasson should face criminal charges. The PDC could eventually turn over the case to the state Attorney General's Office, which would decide whether to pursue charges.

Kaplan said the citizens of Des Moines were "cheated out of a fair election."

"Basically a supporter of the third runway spent \$50,000 to buy himself a city council with the help of a sitting city councilman. It could be easily argued that this illegal money has materially effected the outcome of an election."

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Mayor Don Wasson (0392749182)
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