

# Trio in alleged political plot put blame on one another - Mayor, businessman, consultant involved in state investigation

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*By Bob Young, Jim Brunner and Steve Miletich January 18, 2003 Publication: Seattle Times, The (WA) Page: A1 Word Count: 948*

The three principal players in an alleged campaign-finance scandal in Des Moines -- Mayor Don Wasson, businessman Hank Hopkins and political consultant Tom Hujar -- have blamed one another for concealing \$49,000 in spending aimed at making the city less active in the fight against a proposed third runway at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

Finger-pointing, shadowy campaigns and alleged conflicts of interest are nothing new to Des Moines politics.

What's different now is that investigators from the state Public Disclosure Commission have charged that key Des Moines political figures committed a series of illegal acts while trying to influence the November 2001 elections for City Council.

PDC investigators have charged that Wasson, the mayor, and Hopkins, the businessman who wants a contract to help build the third runway, violated state law by failing to report campaign

contributions and spending. The PDC claims the two hid their activities because they were worried that disclosure would jeopardize the candidates they were trying to elect.

The PDC has not charged Hujar, who spent the money.

Wasson yesterday maintained his innocence and said he will not resign, as some angry residents have demanded.

The mayor claims he "had no knowledge" of the \$49,000 Hopkins contributed to help elect Richard Benjamin, Gary Petersen and Maggie Steenrod.

And, in fact, the \$49,000 did not go to Wasson. Hopkins wrote the checks to Hujar.

But the PDC didn't accept Wasson's claim, in part because Hopkins and Hujar described Wasson as the architect of a scheme to elect new council members.

"There was no question in either my mind or Hank's mind that it was Don's show," Hujar told PDC investigators, according to a partial transcript.

"Mr. Hopkins, Mr. Hujar and Mr. Wasson all understood that Mr. Wasson would be directing how the money would be spent during the campaign," the PDC concluded.

Investigators also said Wasson "directed" phone-bank calls that were made with Hopkins' money to support the three candidates.

Investigators found another problem with Wasson's credibility -- he initially insisted he did not receive a \$1,000 check from Hopkins. But when investigators produced records of the check, which was deposited in Wasson's personal bank account, the mayor acknowledged receiving the money.

Hopkins, through his attorney, Cyrus Vance Jr., issued a statement yesterday proclaiming his innocence.

"As the PDC acknowledges, Hank Hopkins was not the individual who created the political committee that provided monies to the Des Moines candidates," Vance said.

Vance said that the entities that received the contributions -- not Hopkins -- were "obligated to

report to the PDC the monies at issue."

Vance described Hopkins as "a well known and well respected businessman and engineer" in Washington state who has been a contractor and consultant for many large public-works projects, including major portions of Interstate 5 and Interstate 90.

Hopkins wants to win a contract to move roughly 15 million cubic yards of dirt to the proposed third-runway construction project. For several years, he has lobbied the Des Moines City Council for a permit that would allow him to build a conveyor system from the city's waterfront to the runway site.

Hopkins said he relied on Hujar's political expertise and assurances that everything was above-board. "He was the one that conducted everything," Hopkins told the PDC.

But the PDC has alleged that Hopkins "concealed the source and amounts of contributions" in violation of the law.

Hopkins did not inform the candidates he was helping that they needed to report the contributions, the PDC said, because he did not want the public to know the "true source of the in-kind contributions made on the candidates' behalf."

Hujar is a veteran political consultant who has run congressional campaigns for Democratic luminaries Mike Lowry and Jim McDermott. He was also a consultant to Gov. Gary Locke's campaign in 1996.

He was the treasurer of a Bainbridge Island political committee the PDC fined last year for failing to register and file campaign-finance reports.

Reached at his Bainbridge home last night, Hujar declined comment on the Des Moines situation.

But Hujar told PDC investigators that Wasson led him to believe he was filing the required disclosure reports with the PDC. Hujar told the investigators he understood Wasson "was going to take care of the PDC stuff. I thought that he was filling out the public-disclosure documents and was filing it."

The PDC says Hujar received a total of \$50,000 from Hopkins in late 2001 -- \$49,000 directly,

\$1,000 through Wasson -- and spent it on polls, brochures, phone banks and other activities that benefited the campaigns of the three council candidates.

"Nearly everything that was done in terms of the work that was done for these candidates was coordinated completely through him (Wasson)," Hujar told the PDC.

The PDC has postponed its hearing on Wasson and Hopkins, originally scheduled for Jan. 28, until March 25, at Hopkins' request.

The maximum fine the PDC can level for multiple campaign violations is \$2,500. It can refer a case to the attorney general for criminal prosecution as well. PDC spokesman Doug Ellis said the agency's top officials will make that decision after the hearing.

Political turmoil has rocked Des Moines in recent years. Former City Manager Bob Olander was fired last year at an illegal meeting. A former city councilwoman was leading a campaign to recall Wasson and his allies even before the PDC announced its charges. And the state attorney general has advised that Petersen should give up either his council seat or his towing-company business with the city.

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The Seattle Times: Proposed third runway. (GJSDJPH7) Donald Wasson (0392749182)  
photo,map

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**Seattle Times, The (WA)**

**Date:** January 18, 2003

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