

Taylor insists land swap proper

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CUMBERLAND — House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. said a Saturday Baltimore Sun story “exonerates” him from accusations that he used his office to influence a 1994 swap of 498 acres of state forest land for 216 privately owned acres to benefit coal broker and friend James J. Oberhaus.

The Washington Post and Baltimore Sun quoted state land appraiser Henry F. Moomau of Garrett County as saying taxpayers lost at least \$1 million in the exchange of the tract in the Savage River State Forest for less than half that number of acres next to the forest.

Taylor said that loss estimate is inaccurate and that the state had wanted the smaller tract for more than 15 years so that a hiking trail could be completed.

“There are other value to these lands other than coal value. The trail is important to the Department of Natural Resources for recreation and tourism. What value do you put on that?” he asked.

Taylor said he asked Moomau twice in 1994 to move forward with the suggested land swap. The reason, according to Taylor, is that the state had been considering the offer for at least five years, but had not taken action.

“I asked him to get it done in a timely manner so the Schaefer Administration could complete the project before he (Gov. William Donald Schaefer) left office,” Taylor said.

The speaker said he did not talk with Moomau about the specifics of the appraisal.

“To this day I don’t know the appraisal numbers or value of the land or the coal,” he said. “We depended on the experience of the Department of General Services and the Department of Natural Resources.”

Taylor termed two calls to Moomau as the “normal flow of government activity” and that he did nothing improper. Maryland’s ethics law allows lawmakers to help the people of their districts, he insisted

Saturday.

“For the record, in the 24 years I have spent in office, I have never gained a penny from any person or any entity in an illegal or unethical way. I have never gained a penny from Mr. Oberhaus or any of his relatives or any of his companies,” Taylor said.

Oberhaus did not return calls Saturday.

The Baltimore Sun reported Saturday that Moomau said he felt Taylor was “pressuring me to get done” with the land swap, but added he did not believe Taylor’s intervention was inappropriate.

Taylor said he was “exonerated by Moomau’s own words.”

There was no answer to repeated calls to Moomau’s telephone number Saturday.

Taylor held a Friday press conference at Annapolis to respond to the allegations. Delegate George C. Edwards, R-Garrett-Allegany, also attacked the claims.

Edwards said he joined Taylor and Sen. John Hafer, R-Allegany-Garrett, Delegate Betty Workman, D-Allegany, and the Allegany and Garrett county boards of commissioners in signing two letters endorsing the land swap.

“All state policies and procedures were followed,” Edwards said.

A public hearing was held and the transaction was approved by two citizen forest review committees, the state Department of Natural Resources and General Services Administration, he said.

Also, it was the State Board of Public Works that approved the swap, not the lawmakers, Edwards said.

The Friday Post story said Hafer signed the letters only.

However, Edwards said he and Hafer attended the 1995 Board of Public Works meeting when the swap was approved. When Edwards had to leave the meeting for a committee hearing, it was Hafer who presented the testimony, Edwards said.

Hafer acknowledged that he made the presentation.

“I did that based on the knowledge I had at the time. What else do you do when the DNR and

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GSA comes forward with approval? (State Comptroller) Louis Goldstein refused to go along with it, saying he needed more information. It seems to me there is a difference in what we know and what may be out there," Hafer said Saturday.

Workman did not return calls Saturday.

Taylor said the accusations were taken to the Post by Frostburg Mayor John N. Bambacus. According to the speaker, the accusations are a continuation of a "political vendetta," which started seven years ago.

Taylor said he and his two sons were accused of "criminal wrongdoing" involving the Rocky Gap Music Festival Foundation, which Taylor leads.

An eight-month special prosecutor investigation "proved there was absolutely no iota of unethical or illegal conduct," Taylor said.

Taylor said Bambacus, a Republican who served two terms in the Senate seat held by Hafer, also has tried to find impropriety at the Old Depot, which he refers to as the Frostburg Historic Train Station, because Oberhaus owns the depot, which the state is negotiating to acquire so there is a train station at each end of the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad.

"Now he is focusing on a state economic development project that was consummated 3½ years ago. I am satisfied that all of these issues are all tied together," he said.

"For the sake of Western Maryland I wish this would all end," he said.

Bambacus did not return calls Saturday.

Senate President Thomas V. "Mike" Miller said he will not ask the ethics committee to review alleged wrongdoing.

"I only know what I read in the newspaper, but based on what I read, there is no indication of any finances received by the Speaker of the House and I am not going to recommend that anything be taken up by the ethics committee," Miller said Saturday.

Asked if it is proper for lawmakers to represent constituents,

Miller said the speaker is concerned about Western Maryland economics.

"Western Maryland is one of the few areas of the state that considers it economic development to locate a state prison there because it means jobs. The speaker is also concerned about promoting jobs in Western Maryland and he believed (the land swap) to be a fair and square deal that would benefit his constituents," Miller said.

Taylor refused again Saturday to refer allegations about himself to the joint House-Senate ethics committee.

However, he said he will ask to speak this week to a work session with the House Commerce and Government Matters Committee.

The subject will be Taylor's suggested changes to the state's ethics laws.

Taylor said he will use the land swap accusations as an example of some changes that should be made.

He did not elaborate.