

Ethics committee to review land swap stories

Member Workman must first determine role

Comberland Times-News
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3/5/98

ANNAPOLIS — The Joint Committee on Legislative Ethics will review newspaper stories about House Speaker Casper R. Taylor's role in a 1995 Garrett County land swap, committee member Delegate Betty Workman said Wednesday.

She said a committee meeting had been scheduled for Wednesday but its co-chairmen canceled it. It was unclear Wednesday when the review might be done.

Committee co-chairmen Sen. Michael Collins, D-Baltimore County, and Delegate Kenneth G. Montague Jr., D-Baltimore City, were not available for comment.

Workman, D-Allegany, said the lawmakers' code of ethics empowers the committee to examine any news account about a member of the House and Senate. The committee does not need permission of the General Assembly's presiding officers to make such a review which is materially different than an investigation.

Workman said she will ask ethics committee leaders if she should take part in any possible review of the land swap because she had signed letters in support and otherwise endorsed the project.

"I certainly am making an inquiry about what my role might be," she said in a break from a committee hearing.

Workman said she has been a member of the ethics committee for about three years. Minor reviews had been done until recent months when the committee conducted a detailed investigation of Sen. Larry Young. That Baltimore Democrat was expelled from the Senate in January.

More recently the committee had scheduled several weeks of meetings to investigate allegations involving Del. Gerald Curran. Workman said that probe ended when Curran resigned Friday.

Earlier on Wednesday, Workman said ethics committee members received a note from the committee's leadership reminding them that the state ethics laws allow lawmakers to make reasonable, responsible contact with people to represent constituents if the lawmaker does

not materially benefit from such a communication.

Taylor, D-Allegany, said any review would show he is not guilty of an ethics violation.

He said General Assembly Rule 126 allows the ethics committee to informally review media accounts about lawmakers. He has been told the committee might consider two stories in the Washington Post and one in the Baltimore Sun.

"To this moment, no single person has alleged any violation about me," Taylor said. "The innuendo in the original Post story was completely discredited the next day in the Baltimore Sun with a direct quote from the appraiser. Under our ethics law we are allowed to advocate for a constituent and that's what I did. In one (Sun) paragraph the appraiser was paraphrased to say I didn't do anything wrong," Taylor said.

"I want the ethics committee to review the articles and arrive at a conclusion. I am 100 percent sure their conclusion will be no allegations of unethical behavior and no allegations of ethics violations," Taylor said.

Delegate George C. Edwards, R-Garrett-Allegany, said the committee should look at the stories.

"That's fine. They should do that. There is nothing there and this will show that," he said.

Sen. John Hafer, R-Garrett-Allegany, was not available for comment.

In a Sunday Times-News story Hafer acknowledged that he addressed the state Board of Public Works in 1995 to speak in favor of the land swap. However he said he now has questions about the transaction.

"It seems to me there is a difference in what we know and what may be out there," Hafer said.