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Supervisor's expenses are questioned

In O.C., Norby's use of campaign funds to pay unexplained charges raises scrutiny. He says he follows the law.

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Orange County Supervisor Chris Norby, who earlier this month admitted using political contributions to pay for a hotel stay during a spat with his wife, spent nearly \$8,000 from his campaign account in the last months of 2007 on unexplained charges, campaign finance records show.

The spending, which included more than \$1,300 in payments to himself, occurred during a period when Norby moved out of his home because of marital problems and was living in a hotel and, briefly, his office in the county Hall of Administration in Santa Ana.

Norby recently acknowledged that a \$340 hotel charge -- labeled a "study of homeless and hotel families" on his campaign committee report -- was a weeklong stay for himself. He repaid the money to his campaign account when asked about it by The Times.

His unexplained charges labeled as office and meeting expenses were far larger than those of his four colleagues on the Board of Supervisors during the same period. They were also roughly three times as much as he spent for the same kinds of expenses in the same period a year earlier, the records show.

The charges were made in a non-campaign year when Norby was not up for election; in fact, he is in his final term as a supervisor and must leave office in 2010.

State law prohibits spending campaign money on personal items. No direct evidence has emerged showing that Norby spent the money inappropriately, but the large amount of unidentified expenditures -- and his admission of using campaign funds for living expenses -- has prompted heightened scrutiny and skepticism of his financial disclosure statements.

"He's already shown us a pattern of misusing campaign funds," said Shirley Grindle, the county's campaign finance watchdog and a frequent critic of Norby who has filed enforcement complaints against him in the past. "Mr. Norby seems to have an attitude that he is not required to comply with the law."

In a series of interviews, Norby said the unitemized charges were for legitimate purposes and denied that any of the money had gone for personal expenses, including hotel stays or rent, beyond what he had already admitted. He said that the expenditures were for lunches, dinners and drinks with staff and community leaders, and for periodicals and other allowable items. He said each individual expense fell below the \$100 threshold at which it would have to be disclosed.

Norby said he had receipts for all the expenditures but declined to release them. He said his campaign treasurer would not discuss the charges with a reporter. The payments to himself, he said, were reimbursements for proper expenses that he put on his personal credit card.

With business meals, "I tried as much as I could to pick it up on my campaign account, because it was a generous thing to do," Norby said. "I'm not surprised at the figure when I think of all the lunches I take people out to.

"My report was done according to the law, and I stand by it."

Campaign funds are not public money, and politicians have considerable latitude in how they spend it; the only general requirement is that the expenditure must have a political, legislative or governmental purpose.

Historically, regulators have focused more on how candidates raise and receive funds than on how they use them; misuse of campaign money was uncommon because most politicians hoarded cash to run election races.

But in recent years, as California's political maps have been redrawn to guarantee "safe" seats for Republicans and Democrats, leaving only a handful of districts where elections are truly competitive, there have been more incidents of politicians using their campaign funds for questionable -- or outright personal -- expenses.

Earlier this year, the state agency that regulates campaign cash, the Fair Political Practices Commission, adopted strict new rules requiring more disclosure about how politicians spend contribution money.

The rules came in response to reports in The Times that state Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez (D-Los Angeles) spent tens of thousands of dollars from his campaign accounts on foreign travel, meals, wine and luxury retail goods with little apparent official purpose. And this month, the commission imposed a record \$350,000 fine on state Sen. Carole Migden (D-San Francisco) for violations that included spending more than \$16,000 for personal use.

Norby has been sanctioned by the Fair Political Practices Commission over campaign violations in the past. In 2005, he paid a \$10,000 fine for failing to disclose occupations and employers for nearly 100 contributors to his supervisorial campaign.

In the last half of 2007, Norby spent nearly \$14,000 on items labeled office or meeting expenses. Of those, about \$6,000 were itemized, including cellphone bills, meals and travel to a conference in Texas on border enforcement issues.

Also itemized, as an office expense, was the \$340 weeklong stay at the Fullerton A Inn. Norby and his wife, Marsha, are divorcing. Friends say Norby moved back into his Fullerton home this month after she moved out.

But there were nearly \$8,000 in additional charges for office and meeting expenses with no further details. About \$5,500 of that was billed on a campaign credit card, and more than \$1,300 was paid directly to Norby.

His colleagues' expenditures for the same types of charges were considerably lower. Supervisor Janet Nguyen spent the next highest amount, about \$8,900; the others ranged from about \$500 to about \$2,000. In the same period in 2006, Norby paid \$4,400 for the same types of expenses, and nearly all were itemized.

To reach \$8,000 in individual expenses that fell below the \$100 reporting limit during that time, Norby would have had to spend about \$60 every weekday.

The supervisor said he easily could have done that by picking up the check for meals and drinks with his staff, community leaders, county department heads and county workers.

In the cases where he personally received payment from the campaign, it was to reimburse him for charges he put on his personal credit card, he said.

Some of the expenses were for dinner or beers after rounds of golf with other county officials at which they discussed flood control and the county jails, among other things, Norby said.

As chairman of the Board of Supervisors in 2007, he said he felt a particular obligation to cover the cost of such functions because it created camaraderie and lifted morale.

Since he did not face reelection, he said, he felt comfortable using the funds for such purposes.

Norby said the expenditures also may have included computer equipment and office furniture to do campaign work out of his house.

He said that to save taxpayer money, he had his campaign pay for items that probably could have been billed to the county. And he noted that he was not among the supervisors who commissioned expensive remodeling of their Hall of Administration offices last year.

Still, he declined to produce receipts for the expenditures, saying they are not public records and he is not required to do so under state law.

"If you want to cast an aspersion on it, you can, but that's the way it's going to be," he said. "We've conformed to the law. This is all campaign money that has been spent according to campaign law."

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