

Abramoff investigator used lobbyist's skybox, helped client

WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP) — The top Senate Democrat investigating Jack Abramoff's Indian lobbying met several times with the lobbyist's team and clients, held a fundraiser in Abramoff's arena skybox and arranged congressional help for one of the tribes, records show.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., acknowledges he got Congress in fall 2003 to press government regulators to decide, after decades of delay, whether the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe of Massachusetts deserved federal recognition.

Dorgan met with the tribe's representatives and collected at least \$11,500 in political donations from Abramoff partner Michael D. Smith, who was representing the Mashpee, around the time he helped craft the legislation, according to interviews and documents obtained by The Associated Press.

The senator didn't reimburse the Mississippi Choctaw for the use of Abramoff's skybox in 2001, when the tribe threw him a fundraiser there, instead treating it as a tribal contribution. He only recently reimbursed the tribe for the box, four years later, after determining it was connected to Abramoff.

Dorgan says he sees no reason to step down from the Abramoff investigation, which he and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., are leading. He said he had no idea at the time that any of the transactions were connected

to Abramoff or the alleged fleeing of tribes.

"I never met Jack Abramoff but I am appalled by what we have learned about his actions," Dorgan said Thursday. "So I have never felt there was any conflict in my helping to lead that investigation. I think Sen. McCain would agree our investigation has been relentless and that neither of us will be diverted."

Dorgan's contacts, donations and fundraisers involving Abramoff tribal clients and lobbying associates, as well as those of other lawmakers, have not been examined during the Senate hearings into the lobbyist's roughly \$80 million in charges to the tribes.

The senator didn't volunteer the information, although he did disclose his donations in campaign reports over the years.

Larry Noble, the government's former chief election enforcement lawyer, said Dorgan should have considered stepping aside from the inquiry and at the very least should have disclosed all his own intersections with Abramoff's associates and tactics.

"I think any way you look at it he had an obligation to disclose," Noble said. "It is hard for anyone not to see a conflict when you're investigating the same activity you yourself were involved with."

Over the last month, the AP has reported that about four

dozen lawmakers, Republicans and Democrats, collected donations from Abramoff's tribal clients and firm around the time they wrote letters to the Bush administration or Congress favorable to the tribes.

Congressional ethics rules require lawmakers to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest in performing official duties and accepting political money. The Justice Department is investigating whether Abramoff, already charged with fraud, won any undue influence through donations and favors.

Dorgan on Monday sharply criticized the AP for reporting last week that he collected \$20,000 from Abramoff's firm and tribes in the period when he wrote a letter urging the Senate Appropriations Committee to fund a school construction program that Abramoff's clients and other tribes wanted.

The senator said he long supported the program, and the letter and donations had no connection. And he asserted that he never took any action or received any campaign help that knowingly involved Abramoff.

Dorgan, however, benefited from the very arena skybox that has become a symbol of Abramoff's controversial efforts to win Washington influence, records show.

The Choctaw tribe, an Abramoff client that was a primary focus of the Senate hear-

ings, sponsored a fundraiser March 28, 2001, for Dorgan's political group, the Great Plains Leadership Fund. The event treated Dorgan and his donors to a bird's-eye view of a professional hockey game from a skybox Abramoff leased in Washington's MCI Center, while lobbyists got the chance to bend his ear.

Dorgan knew the fundraiser was sponsored by the Choctaw and that two Abramoff lobbyists attended, but at the time he didn't know they were connected to Abramoff, his spokesman said. "He was told the skybox was the Choctaws," Barry Piatt said.

Dorgan didn't reimburse the tribe, instead reporting the event as an "in-kind" \$1,800 tribal contribution without specifying it involved the skybox.

Piatt said reporting it that way was legal and normal. The senator reimbursed the tribe \$1,800 for the skybox earlier this year when he learned from reports that it was connected to Abramoff, Piatt said.

Documents the Senate released show Abramoff charged the Choctaw \$223,679 to underwrite use of the skybox in 2001, the year of Dorgan's fundraiser, even though the tribe "very rarely" used it. Dorgan has denounced the fees as outrageous.

Dorgan and his staff met several times with Abramoff's lobbying team, according to the lobbying firm's billing records.

Archaeologists dig into golf course

NEW ULM, Minn. (AP) — Archaeologist Doug George knelt beside a foot-deep excavation unit at Fort Ridgely and splayed his team's recent findings in a dustpan — nails and bits of glass.

To an outsider, the fragments found inches below the surface seem like rubbish. To George and fellow archaeologists LeRoy Gonsior and Dave Radford of the Minnesota Historical Society, the pieces tell a story about the stables that once stood on the grounds — where Dakota Indians sought shelter during an 1862 battle. White men in the fort shot a cannon at the stables and burned them to the ground.

The excavated pieces are clues to such events. The fragments of glass told the men the stables had windows, which they hadn't known before.

Because of the importance of piecing together the historical puzzle, each and every fragment will be cleaned, catalogued and eventually stored by the historical society.

"We're managing to preserve what we, as humans, did in the past," said George, the project director.

George, Gonsior and Radford have been all over the Fort Ridgely grounds, seven miles south of Fairfax,

since May mapping historic areas and finding six new archaeological sites with artifacts in an effort to study the impact of the upcoming golf course rehabilitation project. Their findings are helping to draw the boundaries of the project, as not to encroach on burial grounds and other areas of historical significance.

The men will quit for the season when the ground freezes and finish their work in spring 2006, when groundbreaking is to begin.

The nine holes of the Fort Ridgely golf course originally were built by local residents in 1927, when few state regulations stood in the way of altering historic grounds. Now the site is protected — as Fort Ridgely Historic District and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Gonsior said the original golf course didn't disrupt many artifacts, as the builders didn't dig too deeply.

"The sites are in better condition than I thought they'd be," Radford said.

Thousands of years of Indian artifacts lie below the surface of the Fort Ridgely area. George, Gonsior and Radford found new sites with artifacts, such as pottery and tools, dating back to the Oneota Culture, 1,100 to 1,600 A.D. Burial mounds dot the landscape.

Tribal leader Allen honored

PORTLAND (AP) — W. Ron Allen, executive director of the Jamestown S'Kallam tribe of Washington, has been awarded the \$25,000 Buffet Award for Indigenous Leadership.

Allen, of Sequim, Wash., was honored for his decades of work toward tribal sovereignty, treaty rights and governmental responsibilities.

He said he will use some of

the award for a project by the National Congress of American Indians to create an Embassy of Tribal Nations, a permanent Indian presence and working space in Washington, D.C.

Allen is a former tribal chairman and has been executive director since 1982.

The annual award by the families of Howard and Peter Buffett recognizes indigenous

leadership that improves social, economic, political or environmental conditions.

Allen has served on the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission.

From 1990 to 1996 he was chairman of the National Indian Policy Center at George Washington University.

Makahs buying timber land traded away in treaty

NEAH BAY, Wash. (AP) — The Makah Tribe has been buying land between its main reservation here at the tip of Washington's Olympic Peninsula and the Ozette Indian Reservation to the south, potentially doubling its yearly timber revenue. Much of the tribe's prop-

erty was ceded to the U.S. government in 1855 for hunting and fishing rights. That land is now under private, non-Native American ownership.

Makah Forestry Enterprises recently completed a more than \$6 million land deal with Cascade Timberlands LLC, which

will return to the tribe 3,811 acres of timber land, expanding its land base by 11 percent.

"The land was important to the tribe," said Meri Parker, chief operating officer of Makah Forestry. "So, too, was our right to fish and hunt in our usual and accustomed places."

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