

Black legislators' visit to Alabama casino raises eyebrows

Written by Administrator

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TALLAHASSEE — A luxury bus picked up four Florida legislators at the Pensacola airport and drove them an hour north to the Wind Creek Casino & Hotel in Atmore, Ala.

A fifth legislator joined them there. They dined with leaders of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians and discussed the tribe's vision for a casino in rural North Florida — a vision that includes slot machines.

The Creeks have a gaming facility in Gretna, a small town about a half-hour northwest of Tallahassee conveniently located off an Interstate 10 exit. And while Gadsden County voters have authorized slot machines there, the matter has been locked up in court ever since.

"By taking the trip, I learned a lot about what the Poarch Creek Indians are doing for the residents of the city of Atmore, and I see the potential benefit of having the Poarch Creeks doing similar things in Gadsden County," Rep. Ed Narain, D-Tampa, said.

The lawmakers, all Democrats whose trip this month was coordinated by the Florida Legislative Black Caucus, didn't pay for their transportation, meals or hotel rooms. All of that will be reported as in-kind donations to their re-election accounts and political committees. The legislators also received campaign contributions and a donation to the Black Caucus foundation.

It does not sit well with everyone that Narain and the others stayed overnight and were feted by the Poarch Creek Indians, who are lobbying hard for the Legislature to approve slots in Gretna.

"It is not surprising that gambling interests would use their money to try to influence legislators; it's what they do," said John Sowinski, president of anti-gambling advocacy group No Casinos. "The fact of the matter is that slot machines in Gretna are not a panacea for their economic situation."

Susan McManus, a political science professor at the University of South Florida, said, "Even if

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technically candidates are adhering to the letter of the law, from a perception perspective, it sometimes just doesn't look right to the voters."

Campaigns are expensive and politicians must raise money, she said, but for many voters, these types of in-kind donations will feed into their cynicism about the political process.

"Yes, this is legal, but to the average person, does it look like it should be legal?" McManus asked.

Beyond the debate over gambling, the trip to Alabama is an example of the legal but criticized practice of lawmakers classifying as campaign-related expenses things of value they receive from special-interest groups. They are prohibited by the state gift ban from accepting trips and gifts from lobbyists. The ability to classify trips and meals as in-kind campaign expenses is largely considered a work-around to the 2006 ethics law.

Two years ago, it was reported that Republican lawmakers had been taking hunting trips financed by sugar companies to King Ranch in Texas. Organized through the Republican Party of Florida, the trips were classified as campaign events. Incoming House Speaker Richard Corcoran later said he would stop holding fund-raisers at the ranch, partially because of the negative attention.

In 2015, family-friendly destinations such as Universal Studios and Walt Disney World hosted members of both political parties. Campaign-finance reports include line items that exceed \$100,000 for in-kind donations of rooms, tours, food and beverages. Casino Miami and Isle Casino Racing in Pompano Beach have also donated food and drinks for fund-raisers. In Florida, political parties and committees can raise unlimited amounts of money.

This month's casino trip wasn't the first time the Creeks welcomed a Florida legislator to Atmore. Rep. Ritch Workman, R-Melbourne, made the trek in July 2014. He picked up a \$25,000 donation to his political committee and his food and lodging amounted to a \$722.82 in-kind donation.

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"It is 100 percent a political fund-raising event; that's what it is," he said recently. "The reason you do it on-site is because part of the enticement for them is they get to show you what they do."

Like Narain, Workman said his time in Atmore opened his eyes to what the Creeks can do for Gadsden County, one of the state's poorest and the only one where the majority of the population is African-American.

All 26 members of the Florida Legislative Black Caucus received a letter inviting them to visit the Wind Creek Casino on Jan. 7-8, just days before they were to report to Tallahassee for the beginning of the legislative session.

Making the trip along with Narain, chairman of the Black Caucus, were Reps. Randolph Bracy, D-Orlando; Bobby DuBose, D-Fort Lauderdale; Darryl Rouson, D-St. Petersburg; and Alan Williams, D-Tallahassee.

Narain said he received a \$1,500 donation to his political committee while in Atmore.

The in-kind contribution amounted to another \$334, which included his transportation to the casino, one night at the hotel, a \$75 dinner and breakfast. A \$383.20 flight from his Tampa home to Pensacola will also be charged to his political committee as a campaign expense.

The others declined requests to disclose the contributions they received. The visit will be reflected when each files campaign finance reports due by Feb. 10.

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