

S.C. lawmakers paying for trips to Egypt, other countries with campaign funds

Published: Monday, 11 November 2019 07:25

by Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Views: 1741

As many as 17 S.C. lawmakers traveled to Egypt last month, most of whom paid their way with campaign funds, State Ethics Commission records show.

Two legislators who used campaign money for the trip – Reps. Todd Rutherford, D-Richland, and

S.C. lawmakers paying for trips to Egypt, other countries with campaign funds

John King, D-York, also tapped their campaign accounts for costs related to trips to Greece and Peru, respectively, according to their latest expense statements.
By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Hits: 1741

State ethics law bans elected officials from using campaign money for personal expenses. But the longstanding law has a huge loophole: It allows officials to use campaign funds for costs related to their “office,” not just their campaigns. And the law doesn’t define what constitutes office-related expenses.

In the 170-member General Assembly, the House and Senate Ethics committees, which are supposed to police lawmakers’ ethical conduct, have broadly interpreted the law over the years, which has allowed members to spend campaign money on overseas trips – so long as it served a general official purpose as recognized by the committees.

“I’ve always objected to the use of campaign money for any purpose except campaigns,” said longtime state government watchdog John Crangle, who made an unsuccessful bid last year for a state House seat, when contacted Thursday by The Nerve. “The idea that you could use campaign money for office-related expenses is something I thought opened the door to a lot of mischief.”

Crangle, the government relations director of the South Carolina Progressive Network, described the legislative trip to Egypt as a “vacation – that’s all it is.”

Three lawmakers who paid for Egypt trip expenses with campaign funds, according to Ethics Commission records – Rutherford, King, and Rep. Heather Crawford, R-Horry – sit on the House Ethics Committee. None returned phone messages this week from The Nerve seeking comment.

The committee in a 2017 written opinion said House members could participate in an “educational tour” that year in Israel using campaign funds, noting, “Since the Member is participating in this educational tour for legislative and economic development purposes in order to carry out the duties of the office he or she holds as a House member, the Committee finds that this would be a permissible use of the Member’s campaign funds.”

The Nerve in 2014 [reported](#) about a Holy Land trip taken that year by 11 House members and a senator. The Nerve’s latest review of State Ethics Commission records found that Egypt trip expenses paid this year with campaign funds totaled at least \$65,951 for 11 House members and two senators.

Two other lawmakers who traveled to Egypt – Sen. Margie Matthews, D-Colleton, and Rep. Seth Rose, D-Richland – told The Nerve this week they used personal funds to cover their expenses. Reps. David Weeks, D-Sumter, and Adam Morgan, R-Greenville, also went on the trip, according to a fellow traveler and lawmakers’ social media accounts – though, as with Matthews and Rose, their campaign reports showed no trip expenses covered with campaign funds.

Weeks, the House Ethics Committee vice chairman, did not return a phone message this week

S.C. lawmakers paying for trips to Egypt, other countries with campaign funds

seeking comment
Published Monday, 11 November 2019 07:25

By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Other lawmakers who reported using campaign funds for Egypt trip expenses included: Reps. Alan Clemmons, R-Horry; Neal Collins, R-Pickens; Mike Forrester, R-Spartanburg; Laurie Funderburk, D-Kershaw; Rick Martin, R-Newberry; Brandon Newton, R-Lancaster; Russell Ott, D-Calhoun; and Chris Wooten, R-Lexington; and Sens. Gerald Malloy, D-Darlington; and Kent Williams, D-Marion, Ethics Commission records show.

Big overseas bills

Total individual campaign-fund amounts spent by the 13 lawmakers who specified Egypt trip expenses ranged from \$3,600 to \$7,982, typically paid in June and July, according to records.

Contacted this week by The Nerve, Newton described Clemmons as the trip's leader, noting the House Rules Committee chairman approached him earlier this year during the legislative session and told him he was "working on a delegation trip to Egypt" and asked if "I would be interested."

"Of course, I was interested in the trip," Newton said.

The December 2014 Holy Land trip also was led by Clemmons, as The Nerve reported then. Clemmons did not return a phone message this week seeking comment. Besides \$5,300 in campaign funds paid to the "SC Mideast Delegation" and another collective \$85.76 that went to the "Embassy of Egypt," Clemmons paid a total of \$12,771 in campaign funds to Delta Air from June 11 to Sept. 12 for unspecified "travel," Ethics Commission records show.

Eleven other lawmakers also listed the "SC Mideast Delegation" as the vendor for the Egypt trip, according to records. Newton said he was told to mail his trip check to an address associated with that name, adding, "I'm sure (Clemmons) played a part in it since he was the leader."

In other overseas legislative trips, Rutherford, the House minority leader, paid \$5,840 in campaign funds on Sept. 30 to American Express for a "Greece Legislative trip," according to his latest quarterly campaign report with the State Ethics Commission. King's latest campaign report shows he paid \$1,676 in campaign funds on Sept. 3 to Delta Airlines for a ticket for the "South Carolina Delegation Trip to Peru."

No other details about those trips were listed in their Ethics Commission filings.

Besides lawmakers, Hugh Weathers, who heads the state Department of Agriculture, went on the Egypt trip from Oct. 7-13, meeting with the Egyptian president on Oct. 9 and also with the country's agriculture minister and head of Parliament, department spokeswoman Eva Moore said in an email last month to The Nerve.

The per-person cost of the trip was \$3,600, which covered "hotels, group meals, and travel within

S.C. lawmakers paying for trips to Egypt, other countries with campaign funds

Egypt,” and Weathers’ flight cost was \$761 from England, where he was attending at the time a separate trade mission paid for by the British Embassy, Moore said. Weathers’ wife accompanied him to Egypt, she said, noting the department would reimburse Weathers for his share of the trip costs.

By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve
Hits: 1741

Asked which lawmakers were with Weathers on the Egypt trip, Moore referred The Nerve to Clemmons, adding that “SCDA didn’t organize the trip.”

On their campaign expenditure statements, lawmakers gave various descriptions of the Egypt trip, including “Political, economic, cultural trip to Egypt,” “Economic development/trade mission,” “Trade Mission Trip,” and “Egypt Economic Development Trip.”

In an Oct. 2 column in The Newberry Observer, Rep. Martin said he would have the “honor of joining a delegation of South Carolina lawmakers” on the Egypt trip from Oct. 5-13, adding, “This trip will be a culture and commerce exchange, where we hope to bring Egyptian companies and manufacturers to South Carolina.”

Martin did not return a written message this week from The Nerve seeking comment.

Pyramids and soybeans

In an interview Wednesday, Newton said his main purpose in traveling to Egypt was to meet with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and other government and university officials to “talk about how we can build partnerships, both economically and academically.”

He said he spent most of his time in Cairo, the country’s capital, with a day trip to the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria where he and other lawmakers toured a soybean facility. He added the group had a “day to ourselves,” adding lawmakers “had to pay for it ourselves if we went anywhere.”

Newton confirmed he and other lawmakers visited Egypt’s pyramids, noting it was “part of the tour of the government.”

As for increasing South Carolina soybean exports to Egypt, Newton said he knows “a lot of soybean farmers who sell to companies that in turn sell to Egypt,” though he couldn’t specifically identify any soybean farmers in his district involved in that trade.

South Carolina ranked 25th in the nation in 2018 in soybean production, while Egypt was fourth behind China, Mexico and the Netherlands in the value of U.S. whole soybean exports, according to the American Soybean Association.

Contacted Friday by The Nerve, Rep. Ott, a cotton and corn farmer, said there could be “some agricultural commodities that are produced in South Carolina that ultimately make it to Egypt.” But

S.C. lawmakers paying for trips to Egypt, other countries with campaign funds

he added. "You just don't really ever know," explaining that South Carolina soybeans that are sold typically are combined with soybeans produced elsewhere before being shipped overseas.
Published: Monday, 11 November 2014 07:25
By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Hits: 1741
Still, Ott said there is a "possibility" that more soybeans and other agricultural products could be shipped out of the Charleston port, potentially making South Carolina "more competitive than our neighbors on the Gulf Coast."

"At the end of the day, any time we can create more markets for our agricultural commodities, that benefits our farmers, and it's going to benefit all our farmers," he said.

In justifying his trip to Egypt, Ott said he comes from a "very rural district, and I represent a lot of farmers."

"The bottom line is, it absolutely was in relation to my office," he said. "There's no reason I would have been over there if it were not for me being a member of the House of Representatives."

Brundrett is the news editor of The Nerve (www.thenerve.org). Contact him at 803-254-4411 or rick@thenerve.org. Follow him on Twitter @RickBrundrett. Follow The Nerve on Facebook and Twitter @thenervesc.