

LaGrotta knew nothing about hefty bonuses, lawyer says

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By Tom Barnes, Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG -- Former state Rep. Frank LaGrotta knew nothing about the hefty bonuses doled out by House Democratic leaders last year and is merely a "tangential" figure in the state's ongoing grand jury investigation of the bonuses, Mr. LaGrotta's lawyer insisted yesterday.

"I know there have been inquiries [of Mr. LaGrotta] in terms of bonuses and other issues, but Frank has really been minimally involved in that inquiry," said Monaca lawyer Stephen Colafella, who appeared with Mr. LaGrotta, his sister, Ann Bartolomeo, and his niece, Alissa Lemmon, at an arraignment here yesterday on state charges against the three.

Attorney General Tom Corbett on Wednesday charged the former 20-year state legislator from Ellwood City, Lawrence County, with two felony counts for hiring his sister and niece in 2006 as "ghost employees." They were accused of lying to a grand jury. Together, Mr. Corbett claims the women received more than \$26,000 in "no-work" jobs in Mr. LaGrotta's district office in Lawrence County.

Mr. Colafella said that while the ex-lawmaker has been "cooperative" with state investigators, his role is merely "tangential" to the overall bonus investigation. Some sources, however, have indicated Mr. LaGrotta is more directly involved in providing information for the probe than Mr. Colafella described.

Mr. Colafella, the son of former state Rep. Nick Colafella of Beaver County, also disputed the claim that the two women were paid for "no-work" jobs.

"To call it no-work or ghosting, I think that's an unfair characterization," he said. "They were engaged to do archiving (of records and files), putting things in chronological order and redacting names from district office paperwork. Anyone who knows these individuals knows they are a very hard-working family."

Mr. Colafella spoke to reporters before and after an initial appearance of the three family members before District Judge Joseph Solomon. They waived their right to a preliminary hearing, and a formal arraignment was set for Dec. 20 in Dauphin County Common Pleas Court. They were released without bail.

Mr. Colafella declined to say if a plea bargain might be discussed before Dec. 20, but he did say, "There have been conversations about possible resolutions between myself and the attorney general's office."



Carolyn Kaster / Associated Press

Former state Rep. Frank LaGrotta arrives at a district judge's office to be arraigned yesterday in Harrisburg. Walking with him are his niece Alissa Lemmon, left, and sister Ann Bartolomeo, who are both being arraigned on false swearing

Mr. Colafella said his client "has been cooperative in respect to the investigation of himself. He's tried to be candid and answer questions. But it's difficult to say what extent Frank's cooperation bears upon the larger investigation" into bonuses.

Mr. Colafella insisted that Mr. LaGrotta didn't know that two members of his former committee staff, Rachel Manzo and Christopher King, received bonuses for their work last year.

"He learned those bonuses were issued to two members of his staff just like everybody else, when he read it in the newspapers," the lawyer said. "He didn't give out any bonuses, he didn't make any recommendations."

Mr. Corbett is trying to determine if any of the bonuses, which amounted to \$1.9 million for the House Democratic caucus last year, were given for political campaign work in an election year, which would be illegal.

House Democratic leader Bill DeWeese has insisted that the bonuses were for excellent legislative work by staff members, not for politics.

Mr. Colafella also disputed a statement Wednesday by Mr. DeWeese, who said he didn't know that Ms. Bartolomeo and Ms. Lemmon were relatives of Mr. LaGrotta when he hired them for office work last year.

Mr. DeWeese issued a statement saying he and other House leaders didn't know about the family connection, even though Mr. DeWeese's signature appears on an employment contract for them.

"I would take issue with that," Mr. Colafella said yesterday. He noted that Mr. DeWeese's signature is on the employment contract for the two women. Mr. DeWeese said a "caucus employee ... signed my name to the memo authorizing" the hirings, and that employee was among seven forced to resign Tuesday.

Mr. Colafella said, "I can't comment on whether anyone signed it themselves, or had someone sign it for them, or whether they had a signature stamp, but those signatures [including Mr. DeWeese's] do appear on the contract."

Mr. Colafella said Mr. LaGrotta is suffering emotionally because of the charges.

"It's been a very tough experience for him and his family," he said. "For anyone who goes through this process, it's emotionally taxing. It's a strain. It's a low point after his 20 years in politics. A lot of people still support him and hopefully he won't be judged just solely on this situation."

Harrisburg Bureau Chief Tom Barnes can be reached at tbarnes@post-gazette.com or 717-787-4254.
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