

LaGrotta points fingers at top Dems

Ex-legislator says staffers were used to help campaigns

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By Dennis B. Roddy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

HARRISBURG -- A former state House member under investigation on allegations he put family members in state jobs and then padded their pay, has given extensive details to the attorney general's office about inside dealings in the Democratic caucus as part of a growing investigation into the use of state workers for political campaigns.

Former Democratic state Rep. Frank LaGrotta, of Lawrence County, is expected to be charged before year's end in the first round of grand jury presentments connected to a widening probe into corruption in the state Legislature.

Sources close to the investigation say Mr. LaGrotta likely will be charged with ethics violations in connection with jobs he provided to his sister and niece, and that a centerpiece in the allegations includes one or more incriminating e-mails retrieved from his state House computer account.

Members of Mr. LaGrotta's staff were among those called before a statewide grand jury sitting in Pittsburgh. Although subpoenaed, Mr. LaGrotta, who served 10 terms in the House before he was defeated for renomination last year, did not testify before the grand jury. Instead, he gave an account of his activities during two meetings with officials from the attorney-general's office in which he was given immunity from prosecution for anything said there.

In those interviews, the sources said, Mr. LaGrotta shed new light on the operations of the House Democratic leadership, including its Office of Legislative Research, which investigators now believe was used for electioneering and whose employees are under scrutiny by a state grand jury in Harrisburg.

Agents from the state attorney general's office in August carried out a search warrant at the research office and took away boxes of materials they believed could contain evidence of election work. Sources said the raid came after agents became worried that the materials had been slated for destruction.

Mr. LaGrotta told agents that partisan political work was widespread in the Office of Legislative Research and that the electioneering work was common knowledge in the caucus.

Investigators are trying to determine if then-House Minority Whip Michael Veon, of Beaver County, assigned House employees to work on his re-election campaign as well as the campaigns of other Democratic incumbents, and whether that campaign work was tied to a series of bonuses given those same employees at the end of 2006.

Mr. LaGrotta told agents he was unaware at the time that the House Democrats had a bonus program in place, and he made clear that while two of the employees being investigated were nominally assigned to work for the House Committee on Tourism and Recreational Development, which he headed, they were, in fact, answerable to Democratic leaders Veon and then House minority leader H. William DeWeese, D-Greene.

Questions by investigators focused on Christopher King and Rachel Manzo, both nominally employees of the House Committee on Tourism and Recreational Development, which Mr. LaGrotta chaired in his final term. In truth, he said, both of them announced that they would be taking lengthy periods of time off from their state assignments, Mr. King to run for the Legislature and Mrs. Manzo to work Mr. Veon's 2006 renomination campaign.

Both said they were either using vacation or compensatory time for extra days worked on their state jobs.

Mr. LaGrotta told investigators he never saw a vacation slip or a compensatory-time slip. He later learned that Mrs. Manzo had received a performance bonus for her state work totaling \$15,185.

He said he never signed either a vacation or compensatory time slip for her and that he was powerless to forbid Mrs. Manzo and Mr. King from abruptly leaving their posts to work the campaigns.

In fact, Mr. LaGrotta argued, neither Mr. King nor Mrs. Manzo was answerable to him as an employer, at least according to a letter he said he received when he was appointed to chair the Tourism and Recreation Development Committee.

He said that Mr. DeWeese sent out a letter advising him that while they were listed on that committee payroll, their first obligations were to the Democratic caucus, which he and Mr. Veon led.

Prosecutors asked Mr. LaGrotta for extensive details about the operations of then House Democratic Whip Mike Veon's office. Mr. LaGrotta told them that at least two employees -- one in Mr. Veon's office and another in Mr. DeWeese's, did little or no legislative work, focusing almost exclusively on political duties.

Mr. LaGrotta's legislative career ended abruptly on primary night last year, when he was ousted by a political newcomer who challenged him because of his vote in favor of a hefty legislative pay raise passed in the late hours of a state budget vote. The raise issue became a drumbeat for opponents who ultimately ousted more than a dozen incumbent legislators, including then state Senate President Pro Tempore Robert Jubelirer, R-Blair, and Mr. Veon.

At the time, Mr. LaGrotta said he had already hired his sister, Anne Bartolomeo, to sort through and remove personal information from 20 years of legislative records that were due to be sent to the state archives. He said he hired his sister, at a rate of between \$800 and \$1,000 a week, for a fixed time period and that he did so only after running the hiring past House leaders.

A year earlier, he had also hired his niece, Alyssa Lemon, as a community affairs liaison.

Mr. LaGrotta said state agents have accused him of placing the two women on his payroll as no-work "ghost" employees. Mr. LaGrotta insists they performed the duties for which they were hired.

At the same time, they have also pressed him for details on the operation of the Legislative Research Office and for information on senior staff members who worked with Mr. Veon.

Mr. Veon referred questions about the probe to his attorney, Robert G. Del Greco Jr., who said his client has done nothing wrong.

"We cannot and will not respond to specific allegations made available to the media," Mr. Del Greco said. "Nevertheless, we want to be clear that Mike Veon steadfastly maintains his innocence -- he has done nothing wrong.

A spokesman for Attorney General Tom Corbett yesterday declined any comment.

After his re-election defeat, Mr. LaGrotta was signed by Mr. DeWeese to a one-year contract to do legislative research, a contract that ended prematurely in July after Mr. DeWeese learned of the ongoing criminal investigation.

Mr. LaGrotta's problems were compounded when a staffer in Mr. DeWeese's office turned over one or more e-mails between Mr. LaGrotta and Ms. Lemon.

The e-mails -- which Mr. LaGrotta said were merely jokes about a paycheck Ms. Lemon said she had not expected -- suggested that she might not have been entitled to vacation and compensatory time pay that was awarded her.

Mr. LaGrotta's legal troubles stem from a complaint by a former staff member who told agents from the attorney general's office about the women and who e-mailed Mr. LaGrotta early this year that his former employer would "be going to jail."

The two women were assigned by Mr. LaGrotta, to prepare his office papers for the Pennsylvania Archives. The state archives are the repository for official papers, and before they are submitted, documents containing personal information about constituents are to be removed.

Investigators were unable to produce the papers Mr. LaGrotta said the women, primarily Mrs. Bartolomeo, had prepared. He told them he later learned that boxes containing the documents had been discarded accidentally .

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