

GOP's requests for records criticized

State time used for costly, ill-focused hunt, foe charges

Tuesday, October 28, 2008

BY JOSH MARGOLIN AND TED SHERMAN

Star-Ledger Staff

Senate Democrats said yesterday that requests by Republican Assembly staffers for dozens of public records over two years suggested a costly fishing expedition by the GOP on state time.

"It has nothing to do with state legislative business and that's what we're supposed to be working on," said Kathleen Crotty, the top Democratic staffer in the Senate.

Copies of Open Public Records Act requests released yesterday by the Democrats show the Republicans were seeking information about legislators holding jobs or elective office outside the Statehouse.

The requests are at the center of an increasingly angry and personal dispute between Sen. President Richard Codey (D-Essex) and Assembly Minority Leader Alex DeCroce (R-Morris) over more than \$120 million in grants doled out by the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

Records released more than a week ago as part of the Republican OPRA requests spelled out for the first time who directed those grants -- known as Christmas tree items -- and the political considerations that went into the awards.

DeCroce subsequently charged Codey with alternately threatening him and offering him a piece of the pie in an effort to halt the Republican requests for those documents. DeCroce offered to take a lie detector test to prove his point.

Codey, in turn, called DeCroce a liar, and said the only conversation s he had was over the use of GOP legislative staffers conducting what he labeled "political opposition research" on state time.

The Republican OPRA requests provided by the Democrats dated from late 2006 and were on Assembly letterhead. They sought such information as salaries paid to certain mayors and municipal council members, authorization for transportation, meals, lodging and travel, and the assignment of any vehicles, cell phones, laptop computers and BlackBerry devices. They were made on behalf of unnamed Republican Assembly members by GOP staff.

Crotty said she flagged the requests after members of the Senate raised questions about the matter, and said Codey thought it was inappropriate. She said rather than file a complaint, Codey went to DeCroce.

"You don't want an environment here where people are filing complaints against the staffs in each other's offices," she said. "We have to work with each other every day. That would not be a good situation."

Robert DeSando, deputy executive director of the Assembly Republicans, said 57 OPRA requests went out between 2005 and 2006, calling them legal and appropriate.

"We wanted to see how state aid was being spent by municipalities and counties that received significant financial assistance from the state in the form of aid or grants, especially from politically controlled slush funds," he said. "The requests were designed to gather information for our members to use to justify our call for state budge cuts."

He said the GOP was also gathering information about those who held both state and local offices to build a case for eliminating the practice. DeSando said they sought dual office holder information about both Democrats and Republicans.