

Lawmakers lash out at Gov. Martinez over campaign contributions

By Dan McKay / Journal Staff Writer

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New Mexico senators on Saturday recalled a bill they had passed four days earlier at the request of Gov. Susana Martinez's administration. (Journal photo)

SANTA FE – In an unusual floor session Saturday, New Mexico senators lashed out at Republican Gov. Susana Martinez and unanimously recalled a bill they had passed four days earlier at the request of her administration.



Governor Susana
Martinez

The anger focused on a failure to notify lawmakers about campaign contributions from the owners of a property that was the subject of the legislation, a lease extension for state offices in Albuquerque.

Owners of the property have made campaign contributions to Martinez or her political committee, senators said, and the legislation her administration sought would have waived some procurement rules to allow the state to

continue leasing the contributors' property.

Two cabinet secretaries under Martinez said Saturday that they had simply failed to find the contributions when they searched campaign records and that they informed the Senate as soon as they realized their mistake.

And they said the deal was a good one for the state. It was evaluated on its own merits, with no pressure from the governor, they said.

A spokesman for Martinez said the lease predates not only her administration but her predecessor's, too. And the campaign donations were properly reported online, spokesman Michael Lonergan said.

"The idea that we would try to hide information that the governor has publicly reported and disclosed and is readily available to the public on a government website is absurd," he said.

Republican Sen. Steven Neville of Aztec, in any case, asked the Senate to recall the legislation, Senate Bill 430 – a request that was approved without opposition. He apologized to his colleagues on the Senate floor.

"I found out the information I was given early on was not accurate – that there were campaign contributions I wasn't aware of," Neville said in an interview.

Once the bill is retrieved from the House, he said, he will ask senators to permanently table it. The measure had been approved 30-10 on Tuesday and sent to the House for further consideration.

Democrats accused Martinez and her administration on Saturday of misleading the Senate.

Sen. John Sapien, D-Corralles, called it a "sweetheart deal."

Some Democrats demanded an apology from the governor and noted the Senate has subpoena power to examine the proposed lease deal. They made it clear they didn't blame their colleague, Neville, for carrying the bill.

But they didn't hold back on the governor. They said the administration knew senators wanted to know about the possibility of campaign contributions from property owners involved in the deal, but the Senate was given incorrect information.

"We're being lied to," Sen. Cisco McSorley, D-Albuquerque, said on the floor. "This is despicable."

People connected to the property appear to have donated more than \$20,000 to Martinez or her political action committee, according to a **Journal** review of campaign reports.

Republicans on the floor didn't come to the governor's defense.

Sen. Mark Moores, R-Albuquerque, noted that a senator resigned two years ago and now faces public corruption charges. He was referring to Phil Griego, a Democrat who is contesting the charges.

"We have to deal with these conflicts of interest and sweetheart deals that happen," Moores said.

The legislation sought to exempt a property on San Mateo Boulevard in Albuquerque from a state-imposed limit on the length of lease agreements.

The state Children, Youth and Families Department had tried and failed to find another suitable property, according to the bill. But it couldn't continue renting its property near San Mateo and Central because it was approaching the state's 20-year limit on lease agreements for private property.

That meant the department might have to "close or reduce some of its services to abused and neglected children," the bill said.

Ed Burckle, secretary of the state General Services Department, told reporters that the failure to tell senators about all of the campaign contributions was an honest mistake.

But he also said the proposed lease was a good deal.

"We were evaluating it strictly on its merits," Burckle said. "I felt it is a good deal for the taxpayers of New Mexico."

Monique Jacobson, secretary of the Children, Youth and Families Department, agreed.

“It would be at no additional cost,” she said of the proposal, “and over a seven-year period it would bring cost savings to the state.”

Senate Majority Whip Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, said he has asked repeatedly about the possibility of campaign contributions and didn’t get accurate responses.

“This is a very serious matter,” Padilla said. “To be doing something like this on the backs of the children, and backing a deal like this, it stinks.”

The Martinez administration, in turn, said the campaign donors at issue have also contributed to the campaigns of Democrats.

“If Democrat senators want to have a debate on ethics and conflicts of interest in state government,” Loneragan said, “we are more than happy to have that debate, though they probably want to wait until after their latest indicted colleague finishes his pending trial.”

Journal Capitol Bureau Chief Dan Boyd contributed to this article.