



Utility's GOP donations linked to exemption

By Associated Press

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Key Republicans, including House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, solicited campaign donations from a financially strapped utility that was seeking their help in winning an exemption from a federal law, according to internal company records.

The lawmakers denied Thursday there was any connection between the donations and the exemption. Federal law forbids the seeking or granting of government business in exchange for donations.

The documents state that executives of Westar Energy wanted to use the tens of thousands of dollars in donations they made to Republicans to get "a seat at the table" of a House-Senate conference committee on the Bush administration's energy plan.

The exemption, from a law intended to protect shareholders and ratepayers, was inserted into that plan, then pulled after the utility came under grand jury investigation.

The documents show at least one Westar executive questioned why he was contributing to GOP candidates he did not know.

The answer, according to the documents: DeLay, House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Billy Tauzin, Rep. Joe Barton and Senate Banking Committee Chairman Richard Shelby were needed for their help on the exemption and had asked that donations be directed, not to their own campaigns, but to those of fellow Republicans in tight races in 2002.

Among the beneficiaries were a DeLay fund-raising committee that got \$25,000; Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., who got \$1,000 from a Westar executive; and Tom Young, Shelby's former chief of staff, whose unsuccessful run for Congress attracted \$1,700 in Westar executives' donations.

"DeLay is the House Majority Leader" and "his agreement is necessary before the House Conferees can push the language we have in place in the House bill," one Westar executive wrote in an e-mail encouraging the donations.

"Shimkus is a close associate of Billy Tauzin and Joe Barton, who are key House Conferees on our legislation. They have made this request in lieu of contributions made to their own campaigns."

The same e-mail added: "Tom Young is Senator Shelby's Chief of Staff who is running for the House in Alabama" and Shelby "made a substantial request of us for supporting Young's campaign."

The documents offer a rare window into a company's efforts to win influence on Capitol Hill, and have surfaced as part of an investigation launched by the company into the conduct of several of its executives and a Washington lobbyist.

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