

Federal jury acquits Maryland state senator

Written by Brian Witte, AP

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BALTIMORE (AP) -- A federal jury acquitted a prominent Maryland state senator Tuesday of corruption charges alleging he accepted more than \$245,000 to advocate for a grocery store chain while he was chairman of a powerful budget committee.

Ulysses Currie, a 74-year-old Democrat from the Washington suburbs of Prince George's County, was cleared of all charges of conspiracy, bribery, extortion and making false statements.

Former Shoppers Food Warehouse president William J. White and former vice president R. Kevin Small were also acquitted of their related charges.

After the verdict was read, Currie praised the legal teams of all three men for working together. "It was a great outcome, and I had tremendous support," he said.

Juror Steven Cason, 55, said he believed the prosecution raised many concerns about about questionable ethics, but they didn't prove the criminal case.

"Well, there were clearly conflicts of interest," Cason told reporters as he was leaving the courthouse. "There were clearly questionable ethical things. I won't say unethical things, but questionable stuff that needs to be looked at. But that's not what he was charged with. That's something for Annapolis and the General Assembly and the ethics commission to look at."

Democratic Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller said in a statement Tuesday night that the matter would be referred to the Joint Committee on Legislative Ethics.

"I am pleased and happy that the jury saw what his friends and colleagues know to be true, that is that Senator Currie is a good and decent man," Miller said. "He may have made some

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mistakes, but he did not commit a crime."

U.S. Attorney Rod Rosenstein said in a statement that the acquittal ends the criminal case against Currie.

"The jury's sole duty is to decide whether the evidence proves a defendant guilty of the charged crime beyond any reasonable doubt, and a substantial proportion of corruption trials result in acquittals," he said. "Prosecutors should never complain about the outcome of a fair trial."

Currie had been the chairman of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, which steers billions of dollars in state spending. He became chairman in 2002, but he stepped down from the position after he was indicted last year. He has remained in office since the FBI raided his home in 2008 as part of the investigation.

Federal prosecutors contended that Currie formed a sham consulting arrangement between 2002 and 2008 as a cover to use his office to do government favors for Shoppers. They said Shoppers paid him more than \$245,000 to work behind the scenes to arrange meetings with state officials and shepherd legislation needed to switch a liquor license from one store to another.

Defense attorneys for all three men argued that Maryland has a part-time Legislature, meaning most lawmakers do additional work to earn money. They said there was nothing illegal or conspiratorial about the consulting work because others knew about it.

Throughout the trial, which began in September, state officials who met with Currie testified that they did not know the senator was employed by Shoppers.

Prosecutors emphasized Currie's failure to disclose the work in required state financial disclosure forms between 2003 and 2007. Defense attorneys explained the omissions by saying the senator's financial disclosure forms have been a mess throughout his 25-year career in the Maryland General Assembly and were not unique to his work for Shoppers.

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Prosecutors also highlighted a list of accomplishments that Currie wrote to Shoppers executives to explain what he had done for the company in a bid to get a raise, which the company gave him.

At the top of the list that Currie titled "Accomplishments on Behalf of Shoppers," the senator noted he helped get \$850,000 from the state for three years to assist the company with rent payment for a grocery store at Mondawmin Mall in Baltimore.

Currie also mentioned his efforts to urge officials to grant \$2 million for road improvements at a shopping center near where the chain was considering putting a store. The money was not granted.

The senator also highlighted his work in approving legislation needed to transfer a liquor license from a store in Takoma Park to College Park, near the state's flagship university. Prosecutors alleged that Currie worked behind the scenes to add an amendment authorizing the transfer in 2005. Currie ended up voting for the legislation, which passed unanimously. Currie did not recuse himself or submit a sworn disclaimer of a conflict of interest required.{jcomments on}