

Money source for Black indicted

PAC officer faces 4 perjury counts

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An optometrist who is House Speaker Jim Black's friend and political ally was indicted Tuesday by a Wake County grand jury on charges of perjury connected to filing false campaign finance reports.

The felony indictments against optometrist Michael Scott Edwards of Murfreesboro offered few details. They came after hearings by the State Board of Elections this year showed that Edwards, described as the "honcho" of one of the state's more prolific political fund-raising groups,

had funneled money to Black but not reported it on finance forms.

One of those checks, for \$4,000, was drawn on Edwards' personal bank account and given to Black with the payee line blank. Black acknowledged at the hearings that he filled it in and made it payable to then-state Rep. Michael Decker of Forsyth County, who cast a deciding vote to keep Black in power in 2003.

Elections officials also said earlier this year that a second check from Edwards to Decker's campaign was channeled through Black.



Edwards is accused of filing reports that omitted donations.

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INDICTED

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Edwards was charged Tuesday with four counts of perjury as treasurer of the N.C. Optometric Society's political action committee. Efforts to reach him Tuesday were unsuccessful.

The charges say he signed and certified campaign finance reports for the committee in late 2002 and early 2003 as true and correct. But he knew that each "was untrue and the omissions and inaccuracies were material," according to the bills of indictment.

The indictments have potential political repercussions: Edwards is now the fourth person within Black's circle to be charged with a crime this year.

Former Black aide Meredith Norris was convicted last month of violating state law by failing to register as a lobbyist for a lottery company, Scientific Games. Decker pleaded guilty last month to a federal conspiracy charge after admitting that he switched parties and supported Black for speaker in 2003 in exchange for a legislative job for Decker's son and \$50,000.

And Kevin L. Geddings is on trial in federal court on fraud charges for allegedly hiding his financial ties to Scientific Games when Black appointed him last year to the state lottery commission.

Moreover, state and federal investigations that focus on numerous dealings connected to the four-term speaker are continuing.

Black, a Mecklenburg County Democrat and practicing optometrist, did not comment on the indictments against Edwards. The speaker has said that he does not believe he is a target of any probe and that he has done nothing wrong.

Edwards has repeatedly declined to comment on his fund-raising. Earlier this year, at the elections board hearing, Edwards asserted his Fifth Amendment

ONLINE

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right to not testify.

Edwards was a focus of those hearings, which resulted in referrals to Wake County District Attorney Colon Willoughby of possible criminal acts by Edwards and others, including Black and his campaign.

Edwards was described in hearings as a longtime leader of the optometric political committee and friend of Black who had regularly raised tens of thousands for Black and for Black to deliver to other candidates.

No other indictments have been issued as a result of the elections board hearings. Willoughby, a Democrat, could not be reached for comment.

Bob Hall, a campaign finance watchdog who is research director at Democracy North Carolina, helped unravel the campaign irregularities.

Hall said Tuesday that the problems with the optometric political committee were twofold: It gathered checks from others without disclosing them before passing them along, and exceeded contribution limits to some candidates.

"Basically, they had created an unreported political slush fund," Hall said. "This was similar to having a brown paper bag with cash in it. Only, it was mostly \$100 blank checks."

Hall said the possible wrongdoing reminds him of Watergate-era campaign practices involving cash and secret money.

"What happened here," he said, "mirrors the practices from days gone by and that got even the president of the United States in trouble."

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