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Complaint against Rout is dismissed

By Richard Locker
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NASHVILLE -- A state board Wednesday in effect dismissed a complaint against former Shelby County mayor Jim Rout for use of nearly \$28,000 in campaign funds for a 2002 reception and travel expenses for his wife in his last three years in office.

Rout, who left office in 2002, argued the spending was an appropriate use of campaign funds and not personal use that would have violated state law.

Obviously I'm pleased. We presented the facts honestly," the former two-term county mayor said outside the state Registry of Election Finance Board.

The board, which administers state campaign finance laws, voted 6-0 to dismiss the first part of the two-part complaint: spending \$12,960 from his political campaign fund for travel expenses for his wife Sandy in 2000, 2001 and 2002 as she accompanied him on official trips for which the county paid the mayor's expenses.

But the board deadlocked at 3-3 on the second part: use of \$14,900 in campaign funds for a 2002 reception at Memphis Botanical Gardens for political donors, campaign workers and top staff. Because it takes a majority for the board to take action, the tie vote effectively ended the case.

Campaign funds are contributed by political donors, not taxpayer funds, but their use is regulated by state and federal law.

Board members indicated they had no problem with the reception as a political event except that the invitation sent to nearly 400 people said it was a "40th wedding anniversary celebration" for the Routs.

The board fined then-state senator John Ford of Memphis \$10,000 last May for spending \$15,320 from his campaign fund on his daughter's 2003 wedding reception. In his defense, Ford said he thought it was legal because many of the guests were constituents.

He also cited Rout's reception the year before.

Memphis political activist Jerry W. Cobb filed the complaint against Rout for possible misuse of campaign funds soon after the Registry fined Ford.

Rout and his attorney, John Ryder, told the board the reception was planned by Rout's son Jimmy both as an appreciation reception for the mayor's political backers and a "thank-you" event for Rout as he was ending a 30-year political career as coroner, county commissioner and mayor. They said the Routs' 40th anniversary was merely used as a "theme" for the reception, but the guest list was virtually the same as the mayor's previous receptions for political backers.

"I was there and I didn't see anyone there who was not a political person," Ryder said.

Rout said he didn't learn of the event until a day and a half before it was held. "The intention was to do something good. I didn't do the invitation. If I had, I would have done it differently."

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