

Senate confirms Sembler

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WASHINGTON - After months of waiting, St. Petersburg developer Mel Sembler was confirmed Saturday as U.S. ambassador to Australia and the tiny Pacific island republic of Nauru.

The Senate quickly and quietly approved Sembler, who had been among a handful of President Bush's ambassadorial nominees criticized this summer for their lack of foreign policy experience. Only Sen. Paul Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat who says Sembler is not qualified, objected to the nomination.

No roll call vote was taken, an indication that Sarbanes had no chance of blocking confirmation.

Republican Sen. Connie Mack of Florida praised the Senate's decision. ``Mel is an excellent choice, and I'm confident he will represent the administration as its ambassador to Australia,'' Mack said in a statement.

The Senate action means that two Pinellas County residents will represent the U.S. overseas. Last week, the Senate voted 79-20 to confirm Sembler's friend, Joseph Zappala, as ambassador to Spain.

Both Sembler and Zappala came under fire from Senate Democrats in June for their lack of foreign policy experience. Democrats claimed that the would-be ambassadors had no qualifications other than the money they gave to Bush's campaign for president.

Sembler served on Bush's National Finance Committee last year, and he gave \$142,000 to various Republican candidates in the last several years. Of that total, more than \$100,000 went to the Bush-GOP 1988 campaign effort. Records show that Zappala gave Bush and other GOP candidates \$130,000.

During the confirmation process, an independent, bipartisan diplomacy group evaluated the nominees and told senators the two men were not qualified.

Also approved Saturday was Della Newman, a Seattle real estate broker whom Bush picked to go to New Zealand. Newman, who headed up Bush's campaign in Washington state, also was criticized for her lack of experience. Democrats had held up her confirmation for several months.

By contrast, the nomination of Florida businessman Charles E. Cobb Jr. to be ambassador to Iceland sailed through the Senate.

Cobb, a former chairman and chief executive officer of Arvida-Disney Corporation, has worked as a top U.S. Commerce Department official the past two years.

He appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday and was approved by the Senate on Saturday.

Sembler, the 59-year-old chairman of The Sembler Company, is a shopping center developer. He served as president of the International Council of Shopping Centers in 1986-87.

At his appearance before the Foreign Relations Committee, Sembler said: ``I have held to the belief that you can and will succeed through hard work and persistence.'' He could not be reached for comment Saturday.

In 1976, Sembler founded Straight Inc., an organization designed to get adolescents off of drugs. He says it has graduated 10,000 teen-agers.

But critics have charged that Straight uses unorthodox tactics. In 1983, a jury awarded a former Straight client \$220,000 after he claimed he was falsely imprisoned for four months by the center.

The Senate also passed, 91-6, a spending bill that:

Forbids the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities from financing works endowment officials believe ``may be considered obscene.''

Extends until Oct. 1, 1990 a ban on oil and gas drilling off the southwest coast of Florida, and also includes \$4-million to buy land surrounding Silver Glen Springs in the Ocala National Forest.

Frees up sales of timber from old-growth federal forests in the Northwest while protecting the habitat of the spotted owl.

Mack and Senator Bob Graham, D-Fla., both voted for the bill. Bush is expected to sign it. - Information from Associated Press was used in this report.

[Illustration]

Associated Press

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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