

82 of 994 DOCUMENTS

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2 St. Petersburg developers clear first hurdle for ambassador posts

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WASHINGTON - Two St. Petersburg developers nominated to be U.S. ambassadors won approval Tuesday from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but not before committee Democrats criticized them as unqualified nominees rewarded by President Bush for their campaign fund-raising.

The committee voted 10-9 for Joseph Zappala to be U.S. ambassador to Spain, but only after Democratic Sen. Charles Robb of **Virginia** joined Republicans in voting for him. Then, Mel Sembler was approved by a voice vote to be U.S. ambassador to Australia.

The nominees must next be considered by the full Senate, though that might not happen until September. When their names come before the Senate, the criticism is likely to continue: The two men have become examples of what Democrats say is Bush's pattern of rewarding political contributors with ambassadorships.

"If donating \$ 100,000 to a political party gives one a better chance of being nominated to an ambassadorship than spending 20 years in the career Foreign Service, our national interests are not being served," said Sen. Paul Sarbanes, the Maryland Democrat who has led the fight against Zappala, Sembler and nominee Della Newman.

Zappala and Sembler are successful developers and jointly helped found **Straight**, a controversial **drug** rehabilitation center. Their work in fighting **drugs** has been praised by committee Republicans.

The two men, who gave \$ 287,000 to GOP causes over the past five years, are among six major GOP donors whom Bush has picked for ambassadorial posts. Newman, though not a fund-raiser, headed Bush's campaign in Washington state and is now the president's nominee to go to New Zealand.

Sarbanes had blocked the three nominees in June, complaining about their lack of foreign policy experience. Even before then, though, Sembler and Zappala faced a rocky trip through the confirmation process.

Several weeks ago, Zappala was asked pointedly by the committee chairman about **Straight** and a loan he got at favorable rates from a bank where he served on an advisory board. He explained that he had no control over the bank's decision.

Sembler and Zappala also ended up on the front page of the Washington Post because information they submitted

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to the committee had virtually identical passages: Each said he is "known as a coalition builder" who is "able to organize my colleagues and peers to action." The forms were filled out by advisers.

And both men have been dogged by rumors - which have been disproven - that they somehow were involved in the influence-peddling scandal involving GOP consultants at the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Along the way, Republicans have come to defense of the nominees and have accused the Democrats of playing politics with the GOP president's nominees.

That happened again Tuesday, when Sarbanes began reading an editorial from the St. Petersburg Times that he said expressed misgivings about the two nominees.

Sen. Connie Mack, R-Fla., was quick to interject to, as he said, "put this in perspective."

"The hometown newspaper that you refer to had grave reservations about my participation in politics as well," Mack said. The paper's editorials backed his opponent in the 1988 election.

Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., noted that the Times also backed Bush's opponent, Democrat Michael Dukakis, last year. Helms added "(That is) what this whole thing is all about," suggesting the Democrats were opposing the nominees because they are Republicans.

Sarbanes, though, worked to refute the idea that his objections were rooted solely in politics. He brought a chart showing that Bush has named a higher percentage of "political" nominees than previous presidents. And he agreed that previous political nominees have had good records as ambassadors.

He also pointed out that a 1980 law specifies that "contributions to political campaigns should not be a factor in the appointment of an individual as a chief of mission."

Sarbanes said choosing nominees such as Zappala and Sembler "contravenes the requirement of the statute."

Some committee members said they sympathized with Sarbanes.

Sen. Terry Sanford, D-N.C., said nominees should speak the language of the country where they will serve. Zappala does not speak Spanish, though he told the committee he is taking classes to learn.

"It's almost insulting to send one that doesn't speak the language," said Sanford.

And, Republican Sen. Larry Pressler of South Dakota said he was "somewhat troubled" by the pattern of Bush picking political backers for the posts.

But in the end, the nine Republicans and nine Democrats at the meeting lined up on opposite sides - leaving Robb, the **Virginia** Democrat.

Robb, who spoke with Mack by phone earlier in the day, explained he had left an "implicit" message of support with the two nominees in previous meetings with them. He called the decision a "close call" but voted for Zappala.

Robb was one of three committee Democrats who last month voted to confirm Donald Gregg to be ambassador to South Korea despite questions about whether Gregg was telling all he knew about the Iran-Contra scandal. At the time, Robb explained that Gregg's testimony was "as reasonable and believable as I think we could expect under the circumstances."

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