

Legislation tainted by Rep. Bill Shuster's relationship with airline lobbyist, critics say

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Rep. Bill Shuster



Shelley Rubino

WASHINGTON — By day, U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bill Shuster worked on a bill to overturn rules requiring airlines to include taxes and fees in advertised airfares.

By night, he wined and dined a top airline industry lobbyist whose employer was his 11th largest campaign contributor.

The eight-term Blair County Republican acknowledged the relationship Thursday and said there's no conflict of interest because girlfriend Shelley Rubino, vice president of government affairs for Airlines for America, doesn't directly lobby him.

Consumer travel groups disagree.

“When there's politically incestuous relationships between a regulated industry and the leadership that oversees it, I don't see how any legislation could come out that would not be tainted in some way,” said Paul Hudson, president of FlyersRights.org and a member of the Federal Aviation Administration's Aviation Rulemaking Advisory Committee.

He said Mr. Shuster has shown partiality to the industry at the expense of consumers, and that he wields so much power that other committee members seem afraid to oppose him.

Mr. Shuster, he said, is allowing the industry broad latitude in writing FAA legislation, while he has ignored input from others, including Mr. Hudson's organization, which proposed 30 reforms.

"So far we have seen no hearings on any passenger-rights legislation. We've been told by some committee members they wouldn't even introduce anything because it might displease the chairman," Mr. Hudson said.

"It's understandable that certain legislators would support certain industries, but this goes way beyond that," Mr. Hudson said. "The real loser in these situations is the traveling public."

Ms. Rubino isn't the only industry insider who has had Mr. Shuster's ear.

Airlines for America's former vice president for legislative and regulatory policy, Chris Brown, recently joined the chairman's staff as director of the subcommittee on aviation.

And, Mr. Shuster's chief of staff, Eric Burgeson, is married to Christine Burgeson, Airlines for America's senior vice president of government relations.

Plus, in a 2013 piece, the National Journal listed Airlines for America President Nick Calio as one of 16 Washingtonians closest to Mr. Shuster.

Barry Kauffman, executive director of Common Cause Pennsylvania, said Mr. Shuster should recuse himself from all committee and floor votes affecting the airline industry.

That could be difficult for the chairman of one of the most powerful committees, whose two biggest tasks this year are passing legislation to fund highway improvements and reauthorizing the Federal Aviation Administration.

House rules, which require abstentions only when a member has a direct pecuniary interest in the outcome, don't seem to require recusal, but Mr. Kauffman said that Mr. Shuster could, and should, step aside.

"There is a difference between what is legal and illegal and what is right and wrong. Out of respect for the American people and their safety, he should recuse himself," Mr. Kauffman said. "He's certainly entitled to have any personal relationships he wants, but if he engages in these relationships, he must put the American people first when it comes to his role as a public official."

A spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, declined to comment.

Mr. Shuster did not respond to a request for comment Friday, but on Thursday he issued a written statement explaining that he followed his office's written policy on personal relationships and that included preventing Ms. Rubino from lobbying him or his staff.

Mr. Hudson said the internal policy is meaningless.

"Having the most powerful person in the House on transportation issues going out with someone who is working for the airline industry isn't right," said Charlie Leocha, chairman of Travelers United, an advocacy group for travelers. "This shows such an incredible lack of integrity."