

San Jose Mercury News (CA)

April 28, 2000

Section: Front

Edition: Morning Final

Page: 15A

EX-FEDERAL PROSECUTOR RECRUITED TO GUIDE INTERROGATORS FORMER ASSOCIATES CALL MATTHEW JACOBS FAIR, IMPARTIAL

HALLYE JORDAN, Mercury News Sacramento Bureau

Matthew Jacobs didn't ask beleaguered Insurance Commissioner Charles Quackenbush any questions at Thursday's Assembly Insurance Committee hearing but he was nonetheless the man behind the interrogation.

A former federal prosecutor, the solemn-looking Jacobs sat at the dais with committee members, whispering suggestions in the ears of the Democratic lawmakers who had hired him just this week to advise them.

Former colleagues say Jacobs was tailor-made for the role. They described him as a fair prosecutor who has experience handling some of the biggest political corruption cases in recent California history.

He can quickly grasp the crux of an issue while weeding out the political baggage that often clouds such investigations, said former U.S. Attorney Charles J. Stevens.

"He is not going to fall into anyone's political trap," Stevens said. "He's going to give advice that will be designed to ferret out the facts and conduct a fair and impartial assessment of any allegations of wrongdoing."

Jacobs declined to comment on his new role, referring questions to Assembly leaders.

Legislative staffers said Jacobs was recruited in part because the committee lacks the experience in handling complex, legal investigations.

Rich Zeiger, a spokesman for Assembly Speaker Robert Hertzberg, D-Van Nuys, said Jacobs spent the week helping lawmakers "research the legal issues involved and providing information to the committee staff to be used in preparation for the hearing."

Sacramento lawyer John P. Panneton, a former assistant U.S. attorney, said Jacobs will help lawmakers keep their investigation on track.

"He was never a prosecutor who was vindictive or overzealous," Panneton said. "He looks at the facts with fairness and impartiality."

That trait is crucial in a legislative investigation fraught with political implications. Quackenbush insists he's being targeted by the Democratic-controlled Legislature because he is one of only two Republicans to hold statewide elected office. His aides call the investigation a "witch hunt."

A 10-year veteran of the U.S. Attorney's Office, Jacobs supervised the public corruption and fraud unit and served as chief assistant U.S. attorney -- the No. 2 post -- for the past three years.

"He brings a breadth of knowledge and a number of years of experience," said U.S. Attorney Paul Seave. "He would be the perfect choice for this kind of assignment."

Jacobs was a familiar face for Capitol reporters covering political corruption trials stemming from a six-year FBI probe into political extortion. He served as one of the prosecutors who convicted former state Sen. Paul Carpenter and longtime lobbyist Clay Jackson, who was accused of secretly steering insurance contributions to former Sen. Alan Robbins, D-Van Nuys, using Carpenter as a middleman.

Carpenter and Jackson were convicted of various corruption charges, and Robbins pleaded guilty. Jacobs' expertise doesn't come cheap. Jon Waldie, chief administrative officer of the Assembly Rules Committee, said Jacobs is billing the Assembly \$250 an hour, not to exceed \$10,000 a month. His contact with the Assembly is likely to continue after the Quackenbush hearings. Waldie said Jacobs is expected to assist in the creation of an oversight office Hertzberg has proposed.

Illustration:Photo

PHOTO: Jacobs
[000428 FR 15A]