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Giuliani: Board Cleared Flight

Says Trump jet trip was 'gift to the city'

By Robert Polner
STAFF WRITER

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani sought and received clearance from a city ethics board before taking a flight to Israel on Donald Trump's corporate jet, the mayor said yesterday.

Still, the flight raised questions among some advocates of clean government because Trump does business with the city. The developer received a concessionaire license last month to operate the Wollman Rink in Central Park for 10 years.

But the mayor said he was happy to accept a "gift to the City of New York" to save time compared with using a commercial airline.

Although invited to fly to Jerusalem with mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg and Gov. George Pataki on a Bloomberg-owned corporate jet, Giuliani had plans to attend a funeral for a firefighter who died in the World Trade Center attacks, so he decided to travel separately with his girlfriend, Judith Nathan.

The mayor's office said last night that the cost of the trip was defrayed by two donors, New York businessman Jeff Silverman and Israeli businessman Daniel Ben-Naim.

The two donors paid Trump for the mayor's office, said Deputy Counsel Larry Levy. Levy did not know the amount of the payments or the price of the trip. Experts put the cost at upward of $12,000 a person.

"That trip was done through the Conflict of Interest Board, and it was done as a gift to the city of New York," Giuliani said after returning to New York. "It was all approved before I took it," he said, adding that a commercial flight would have "added probably another 12 hours to the trip."

Gene Russianoff, of the New York Public Interest Research Group, criticized the mayor for accepting the Trump flight.

"The appearance here just isn't good," said Russianoff. "Someone whose pocketbook is affected by the mayor's policy decisions probably shouldn't be permitted to give him a free ride."

Trump, aside from regaining the skating rink concession, won permits to erect the city's tallest residential building last year, near the United Nations. When neighbors sued to try to block the project, the Giuliani administration declined to take sides. The lawsuit failed.

City ethics rules generally bar city officials from accepting gifts larger than $50, but exceptions exist for flights and lodging when the trip has a legitimate public purpose.

Two former police commissioners in the Giuliani administration landed in hot water for accepting free trips from businessmen. Howard Safir went to the Academy Awards in 1999, and Bill Bratton went to the Dominican Republic for rest and relaxation three years earlier, a jaunt that drew the mayor's wrath.

Staff writer Jessica Kowal contributed to this story.

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