

## **\$10M for I-75 interchange gets national attention**

More connections made between Rep. Young, Aronoff, and the mysterious earmark

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Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, still isn't talking. But the buzz about his \$10 million earmark for an Interstate 75 interchange at Coconut Road is getting louder.

More than a year after the Daily News reported how the funding mysteriously found its way into Young's federal transportation bill, the congressman is under national scrutiny for the appropriations.

A New York Times article Thursday drew a closer connection between Young and a landowner who would stand to gain from the interchange.

Some Lee County leaders said the report further confirms what they have known all along — wealthy investors influenced the funding for an interchange the county didn't want or need.

"I think it's an absolute waste of \$10 million of taxpayers' money," said Phil Douglas, a resident who lives in The Brooks, which is off of Coconut Road in Estero. "I think the money should be re-appropriated to the widening of Interstate 75. If that can't be done, we don't take the money."

The Times reported that Young chartered a plane for a trip to Fort Myers in Feb. 2005. During the trip he held a town hall meeting about transportation issues at Florida Gulf Coast University and attended a fundraiser for his reelection campaign at the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Spa & Resort.

The plane was owned by Corporate Flight, a Michigan charter company that is associated with Daniel J. Aronoff, a part-time Naples resident and real estate developer, the Times reported.

Aronoff owns more than 1,000 acres east of where the interchange would go.

Years ago, Aronoff's company floated plans to build a 4,000-home community on the property. However, the property lacks easy access. Coconut Road does not extend east of Interstate 75.

Local officials fear the interchange could open Aronoff's environmentally sensitive land to development.

"My opposition to this is that it is going to destroy the ecology of the area," Douglas said. "I think we have to protect the integrity of our sensitive wetlands."

The Times also reported that Aronoff was the main organizer of the re-election fundraiser. Young raised at least \$16,000 from donors who listed addresses in Naples, Bonita Springs and Fort Myers, and additional thousands came from individuals or groups with connections to Southwest Florida.

A secretary at Aronoff's Naples office for Landon Companies said Aronoff was out of the office this week. He did not return a message for comment.

A spokeswoman for Young said the congressman is not talking about the issue.

"We see it as an old, recycled story that has no legs anymore," said Young's press secretary, Meredith Kenny.

Much of the Times information came from Joe Mazurkiewicz, a former mayor of Cape Coral who is now a consultant for the Bonita Springs Chamber of Commerce, the Bonita Springs-Estero Association of Realtors and the Cape Coral Council for Progress. Mazurkiewicz said Thursday that his comments in the Times were "sliced and diced."

When the fundraiser took place, Mazurkiewicz said, the Coconut Road interchange was not on the radar.

"We were working to get money for I-75," he said.

The \$10 million earmark came out of the town hall meeting at Florida Gulf Coast University, where officials proposed building an intelligent transportation center in conjunction with the proposed interchange at Coconut Road, Mazurkiewicz said.

"That's what I think Congressman Young was impressed by," he said.

But Mazurkiewicz said in the Times report that a staff member from Rep. Connie Mack, R-Fort Myers, told his wife the Young fundraiser was sponsored by "Aronoff."

A few months after Young's trip to Fort Myers, the \$10 million earmark for the interchange, which was not in the county's long-term plans, appeared in the federal transportation bill.

Adding to the mystery, neither Mack nor Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, both of whom serve on the House transportation committee with Young, would take credit for the funding.

Mack's camp continues to deny any involvement.

"As we've said before, we had nothing to do with seeking the funding for the Coconut Road interchange," Jeff Cohen, Mack's chief of staff said Thursday. "Those dollars were stuffed into the bill unbeknownst to us, having nothing to do with us except for the fact that Connie Mack represents the 14th District."

Local leaders are still determining what to do about the interchange.

The Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization has changed its mind on whether to support the interchange several times. For now, the organization is waiting on environmental studies before it takes another step.

The MPO is expected to decide in June whether the state should move forward with an Interchange Justification Report, which would determine whether an intersection is needed.

If anything comes out of the national coverage of the issue, Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah hopes it will shed light on the problems with earmarks.

"The unfortunate ramifications of earmarked legislation is it's based on political influence versus demonstrated need," Judah said. "Precious funding needed for transportation improvements gets funneled in another direction to support special interests."

*Staff writers Charlie Whitehead and Amie Parnes contributed to this story.*

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