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Campaign Funds for Alaskan; Road Aid to Florida

By [DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK](#)

WASHINGTON, June 6 — It is no secret that campaign contributions sometimes lead to lucrative official favors. Rarely, though, are the tradeoffs quite as obvious as in the twisted case of Coconut Road.

The road, a stretch of pavement near Fort Myers, Fla., that touches five golf clubs on its way to the Gulf of Mexico, is the target of a \$10 million earmark that appeared mysteriously in a 2006 transportation bill written by Representative Don Young, Republican of Alaska.

Mr. Young, who last year steered more than \$200 million to a so-called bridge to nowhere reaching 80 people on Gravina Island, Alaska, has no constituents in [Florida](#).

The Republican congressman whose district does include Coconut Road says he did not seek the money. County authorities have twice voted not to use it, until Mr. Young and the district congressman wrote letters warning that a refusal could jeopardize future federal money for the county.

The Coconut Road money is a boon, however, to Daniel J. Aronoff, a real estate developer who helped raise \$40,000 for Mr. Young at the nearby Hyatt Coconut Point hotel days before he introduced the measure.

Mr. Aronoff owns as much as 4,000 acres along Coconut Road. The \$10 million in federal money would pay for the first steps to connect the road to Interstate 75, multiplying the value of Mr. Aronoff's land.

He did not return phone calls seeking comment. A consultant who helped push for the project spelled out why its supporters held the fundraiser.

“We were looking for a lot of money,” said the consultant, Joe Mazurkiewicz. “We evidently made a very good impression on Congressman Young, and thanks to a lot of great work from Congressman Young, we got \$81 million to expand Interstate 75 and \$10 million for the Coconut Road interchange.”

Mr. Young’s role, first reported by The Naples Daily News, has escalated objections to the project. Environmentalists say the interchange would threaten wetlands. And [a Republican](#) commissioner of Lee County, Ray Judah, is campaigning against the interchange, calling it an example of Congressional corruption that is “a cancer on the federal government.”

“It would appear that Don Young was doing a favor for a major contributor,” Mr. Judah said.

The turmoil occurs at an awkward time for Mr. Young. A corruption scandal involving an Alaskan oil company has rattled the Republican Party in Alaska, and Mr. Young is among the biggest recipients of the company’s campaign donations.

One of his former top aides, Mark Zachares, has pleaded guilty to separate bribery charges involving the lobbyist [Jack Abramoff](#).

House Republicans, meanwhile, are in a public relations battle with Democrats for the high ground on reforming “earmarks,” the pet projects that lawmakers tuck into spending bills behind closed doors.

As they have exploded in number for the last 12 years — the 2006 transportation bill included more than 6,300 projects worth more than \$24 billion, the nonpartisan Taxpayers For Common Sense says — earmarks have proven ripe for cronyism, corruption and abuse. Though the House recently passed a rule requiring the disclosure of earmark sponsors, the flow does not appear to have slowed.

Until Democrats took control of Congress in January, Mr. Young was chairman of the Transportation Committee, and he and his staff distributed transportation earmarks to lawmakers seeking projects. Mr. Young may have first learned of Coconut Road on Feb. 17, 2005. That is when he flew to the region on a plane owned by Corporate Flight, a Waterford, Mich., charter company that is associated with the Aronoff family, which is based in nearby Bloomfield Hills, Mich. The Aronoffs are among the company's biggest clients, said its general manager, Tom Hector.

Mr. Young's re-election campaign reimbursed the company \$3,422 for the flight, his campaign filings show.

At the invitation of the congressman from the district, Connie Mack, Mr. Young visited Florida Gulf Coast University for a meeting on the Interstate and other transportation questions. Afterward, Mr. Young went directly to the fund-raiser at the Hyatt Coconut Point.

His campaign records show that he received more than \$40,000 in contributions on one day around that time, mostly from southwestern Florida developers and builders. Mr. Aronoff gave \$500 to Mr. Young's campaign and later gave \$2,500 to Mr. Young's Midnight Sun political action committee.

The invitations to the event listed as hosts Mr. Mack, a business group called the Southwest Florida Transportation Initiative that includes Mr. Aronoff's company and two executives of other Florida developers.

Asked in a telephone interview who had organized the fund-raiser, Mr. Mazurkiewicz, the consultant, said he was then at another fund-raiser with a member of Mr. Mack's staff who would know.

"Aronoff," the staff member told Mr. Mazurkiewicz, within earshot of his mobile phone.

"Just some local businessmen," Mr. Mazurkiewicz said into the phone. When pressed, he confirmed that the staff member had named Mr.

Aronoff. Later, Mr. Mazurkiewicz called again to list the names on the invitation.

The Aronoffs, major Republican donors, gave more than \$200,000 to Republican candidates and political committees in the 2006 election. Their business, the Landon Companies, is best known for building mobile-home parks. But it also operates a real estate development business in Florida.

Daniel Aronoff has taken over active management of the company from his father, Arnold Y. Aronoff, who had a checkered career in Florida real estate. In 1979, Arnold Aronoff was sentenced to two years in prison after pleading guilty to mail fraud in a scheme to sell Florida swampland at an inflated price.

When he was approached near the House floor by a reporter, Mr. Young responded with an obscene gesture.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Young, Meredith Kenny, initially said that Mr. Mack had requested the Coconut Road money. A spokesman for Mr. Mack, however, said he did not ask for the money. His chief of staff, Jeff Cohen, said Mr. Mack was surprised to find the project in the bill long after it had passed. "At the end of the day this thing got stuck in there unbeknownst to us and having nothing to do with us, other than it is our district," Mr. Cohen said.


The plans for the earmark and the Aronoff land hit a roadblock when the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization voted twice last year to block a preliminary study for the interchange, mainly on environmental grounds. Studies by the [Army Corps of Engineers](#), the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) and the Federal Highway Administration have all warned that the proposed interchange could threaten wetlands.

But Mr. Young was evidently determined to see the interchange move forward. In a Jan. 23, 2006, letter to the chairman of the planning

agency, Mr. Young warned that his committee would draft another bill taking away the \$10 million if it was not used for the interchange.

On Jan. 31, Mr. Mack followed up with a letter warning that the rejection would “make it difficult for Southwest Florida to have future success in securing federal resources for other important projects.”

The planning organization subsequently reversed itself and approved an initial study of the proposed interchange. But the last election put more environmentalists on the county commission. Next month, county planners will again take up the question of what to do about Coconut Road.

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