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PSC

say ‘former legislator’ and instead say ‘PSC commissioner,’” he said Friday. “This is the most exciting thing that’s happened in my 44 years of life, and I’m not going to blow it.”

Workman earned media attention in 2011 when he tried to bring back “dwarf tossing,” and when his name appeared on the client list of Ashley Madison, an online dating website he said he joined when he was not married. He tried but failed to pass legislation to stop judges from considering marital infidelity when deciding how much alimony a spouse deserves in a divorce settlement, and he rose to prominence in 2014 as chair of the powerful House Finance and Tax Committee.

As chair of the committee, Workman won the governor’s affection when he helped to escort through a reduction in vehicle fees sought by Scott. But Workman also refused to hear a bill that would have placed a constitutional amendment on the November 2014 ballot for voters to decide if businesses that install solar panels should be given a property tax exemption when their property values rose after the installation of the equipment.

He told the Herald/Times then that: “I just don’t see the need to continue to expand the incentives and underwriting of solar.”

The utility industry was quietly opposed to the measure, and Workman’s actions bought them two years of delay. With big-box retailers demanding it,

legislators put the issue on the August 2016 primary ballot — after utility lobbyists successfully fought to keep it off the November general election ballot — and it was approved by 73 percent of voters.

Workman now considers that action an aberration, and points to his efforts to advance a bill a year earlier, giving individual homeowners a tax break on solar installations.

In 2015, former House Speaker Steve Crisafulli gave Workman the chair of the powerful Rules Committee, a position that allowed him to control what bills and amendments saw the light of day.

The role made it easy for Workman’s political committee, Citizens United for Liberty and Freedom, to attract large donations from companies seeking legislation. Workman, whose net worth went from negative \$24,000 in 2013 to \$34,432 in 2015, used the political committee to cover the cost of many expensive meals while he was in Tallahassee, according to the expenditure reports.

On one day in December 2014, during a week legislators were in town to hold committee meetings in advance of the legislative session, Workman’s political committee had three expenditures he labeled as a “fundraiser.” Purchases on Dec. 9 included: \$65.66 at Jacob’s on the Plaza restaurant, \$29.16 at Andrew’s Capital Grill & Bar and \$717.70 at Cypress Restaurant. All three are within three blocks of the Capitol.

Workman’s fundraising

for the week didn’t end there. On Dec. 10, he spent \$225.98 at Kool Beanz Cafe for a “fundraiser” and \$119.17 at Avenue Eat and Drink the same night, for a “fundraiser.”

The next day he was at The Front Porch, another high-end restaurant in Tallahassee, where he spent \$62.60. Sometime that day, his political committee racked up a bill for \$5,231 at the Governor’s Club, a members-only restaurant also a block from the Capitol.

By Dec. 12, Workman had one more Tallahassee fundraiser charged to his political committee: \$56.55 at Jacob’s. And on Dec. 13, he was back in Melbourne holding a “fundraiser,” where he charged \$160.36 at the Rodizio Grill.

During this five-day period, Workman spent \$6,668 at nine restaurants. His committee received four checks totaling more than \$12,700 in December 2014, including \$6,231 from the Florida Insurance Council and \$5,000 from the optometrists’ political committee. All were dated several days after the “fundraisers.”

Throughout 2015 and 2016, Workman’s political committee spent more than \$8,900 on fundraisers in Tallahassee — the lowest single expense being \$18.81 at Andrew’s.

Between 2014 and 2016, there are \$3,600 other “travel meals” and “travel expenses” from Nashville to Atlanta to Orlando. They include fuel, car rentals, hotels and air fare. Workman’s political committee also financed a \$4,400 trip to the Kentucky Derby in May 2016, where he joined other legislators including former state Sen. Frank Artilles, R-Miami.

“I have a large family. My wife is a self-employed speech therapist. We make just fine money,” Workman told the Herald/Times. “We own a farm — donkeys and alpacas — a hobby farm and petting zoo. We don’t have a lot of money, and one of the rules I made for myself is this part-time job, with all the remarkable expenses and travel it takes, won’t affect my income.”

He said he not only used the “fundraisers” to meet with lobbyists but to meet lobbyists and their clients. “Yes, I’m trying to sell myself and why they should give me \$1,000, but it’s also a meal I wouldn’t have otherwise bought and my family shouldn’t have to pay for it.”

State law bans legislators from accepting as much as a cup of coffee from a lobbyist without paying for it, but the laws governing political committees allow lawmakers to take checks of unlimited amounts from lobbyists for their political committees and then use that to pay for everything from tolls and tickets to meals and trips.

“This looks to me like an attempt to get around the gift ban,” said Ben Wilcox, director of Integrity Florida, a Tallahassee-based public interest watchdog group and he said Workman’s expenses expose the flaws in the law. “If you call it a fundraiser, and you’re not raising any money but are meeting with potential donors, it’s probably legally a fundraiser.”

Workman’s political committee raised more than \$890,000 over three years with large contributions from gambling, healthcare, insurance, marijuana, telecommuni-

cations and sugar interests. Workman, who was term limited out of the House, ran for a state Senate seat against another House member, Debbie Mayfield, in 2016 and lost.

The committee raised its last dollar a week before the August 2016 primary, when he lost to Mayfield. The high-end spending ended then, too. The committee spent its last dollars on contributions to other candidates, a couple of charities, to pay his accountant’s bills, and to a second political committee, Accomplished Conservatives, that financed much of the political spending in his race.

During his eight years in the legislature, Workman’s campaigns received \$1,500 in contributions from Duke Energy, \$1,500 from Gulf Power, \$2,000 from Next-Era, which owns Florida Power & Light, and \$2,500 from TECO.

Florida Power & Light contributed \$5,000 to Workman’s political committee. The committee also raised another \$109,000 from political committees controlled by the Florida Chamber and Associated Industries of Florida, which each received large utility donations.

In April 2014, after Workman halted a vote on the solar amendment, he posed with Duke Energy lobbyist Andreina Figueroa at a Darius Rucker concert.

“This is how much country I am going to get! With my photo bomber Ritch Workman. #dariusrucker thanks #dukeenergy,” Figueroa posted on Facebook.

During Workman’s interview with the Florida PSC Nominating Council, for the \$131,000-a-year job, he was asked what he thinks are some of the

challenges Florida faces.

Workman responded that he believes that renewable energy is going to “cause the biggest heartburn because it’s not only an energy issue but is almost a social issue now.”

He explained that “as solar becomes more and more cost-effective, you see the companies moving more and more to it.” He then echoed the talking points of many in the utility industry — which are disputed by solar advocates — and argued that the increase in low-cost renewables will cost consumers.

“You have to make sure you balance the need to move to renewable energy — making sure that the ratepayers aren’t overly burdened because it feels good to move to renewables,” he said.

Reached Friday, Workman said his goal is “to make the skeptics very, very proud” by demonstrating he will “focus on trying to do the right thing,” and is not captive to the special interests.

“I’m not beholden to anybody — not the solar industry, the utility industry and not the consumer,” he said. “Sometimes the law is black and white, but sometimes the law is gray, and when it’s gray, I hope to err on the side of the consumer because they’re the ones paying the bills.”

Workman’s appointment to the PSC is effective Jan. 2. He must receive confirmation from the Florida Senate.

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