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Watt critical of race to reform ethics rules

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All this reform stuff isn't what it's cracked up to be.

That's the word from Rep. Mel Watt, D-N.C., of Charlotte, who thinks Congress is going a little overboard in its effort to pass new ethics rules.

"I was never one to go out and party with lobbyists anyway, so it's kind of a relief," he said of stricter House rules. "But I'm not going out at somebody else's request, paying for my own meal, embarrassing everybody because I got to hold up everybody at the end of the evening so I can get a separate check and keep track of my one-tenth of the bottle of wine."

He recently canceled a trip to California to speak to a group of lawyers trying to reform the legal system because he's only allowed to spend one night following the five-hour flight.

"I've got to get there the day I give a speech and be on a plane the next day," he said. "Part of the benefit of giving the speech is the dialogue you have the next day."

Watt was one of only 37 lawmakers in the 435-member House to vote against a lobbying reform bill and among 22 to oppose an "open government" bill that passed the House in late May.

"If you give me a set of rules, I'm going to comply by the rules," he said. "But don't expect me to go out and shoot myself in the foot just because the public wants me to shoot myself in the foot. There's limits to everything, and you have to be reasonable about it." IN MY OPINION Off and On the Hill

No consensus on indicted lawmaker

Watt doesn't think it's the role of the House to punish Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., who was indicted recently in a bribery investigation. "There's no history of forcing people out," Watt said.

He thinks it ought to be left to Jefferson's constituents and the legal process.

Another N.C. Democrat disagrees, saying the legal process could take years. Rep. Heath Shuler of Waynesville called for Jefferson's immediate resignation.

"In our legal system, Mr. Jefferson is considered innocent until proven guilty in the court of law," Shuler said. "However, the leaders of our nation are held, and should be held, to higher standards. It is imperative that the people of the United States know that their elected representatives are not abusing their power or the public trust."

Watt did support having the House ethics committee investigate the matter. Only one N.C. member, Rep. G.K. Butterfield, a Democrat from Wilson, voted against the resolution directing the House ethics committee to investigate alleged illegal conduct by Jefferson. It passed 373-26 Tuesday.

Shuler strays from party line, study says

Shuler was ranked the most independent freshman in a voting analysis conducted by Congressional Quarterly's CQPolitics.com.

He voted with his party leadership 83 percent of the time, the fourth-lowest among Democrats. The "party unity" average was 96 percent.

Among the issues he bucked the party on: He voted against promoting embryonic stem cell research and against expanding the definition of "hate crimes."

Business leaders make their case in D.C.

About 25 business executives participated in the Charlotte Chamber's annual trip to Washington last week. Among those visiting were Walter Price, senior vice president of government relations for Wachovia; Mohammad Jenatian, president of the Greater Charlotte Hospitality and Tourism Alliance; Ed McMahan, vice chairman of Little Diversified Architectural Consulting; and Chuck Allen, director of corporate affairs at US Airways.

Transportation funding, including about \$4.3 billion in unfunded needs, was a recurring theme, says Natalie English, the chamber's senior vice president for public policy.

The business leaders met with lawmakers from the area, including Reps. Sue Myrick, R-N.C., of Charlotte, Robin Hayes, R-N.C., of Concord, and Howard Coble, R-N.C., of Greensboro.

Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory says he comes to Washington a couple of times a month to advocate for federal programs that impact the city.

"I have to grovel a lot," he joked.

Okafor speaking up for blood safety

Washington is a popular place for raising money and raising awareness.

Charlotte Bobcats forward Emeka Okafor is expected in the capital this week to talk about the Safe Blood for Africa Foundation, which is working to prevent the spread of AIDS and other illnesses in sub-Saharan Africa.

Okafor, whose parents are from Nigeria, will meet with lawmakers, corporations and foundations.

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