State flies Bruno to fundraisers

Taxpayers finance trips of Senate majority leader to New York City political events

By JAMES M. ODATO
Capitol bureau

ALBANY — Three times this year, Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno has used taxpayer-funded state aircraft to fly to political fundraisers in Manhattan while certifying he was on official state business, according to documents obtained by the Times Union.

In addition to routinely using state helicopters to fly from Albany to New York City for years, almost weekly, Bruno has also received ground transportation downstate from State Police, even when traveling to fundraisers.

Bruno's staff claims he faces constant threats to his life and safety and it therefore provided security details.

This year, Bruno requested the state planes in writing for "legislative business meetings," and signed, or had someone stamp his signature, on documents asserting that his use of state aircraft was for official business. The disclosure forms are required under state law.

Scientists go green.

Ice meltdown quickens.
BRUNO: Political trips of majority leader at issue

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a new rule instituted by Gov.
Spitzer.

According to flight documents and State Police Aviation Unit request forms obtained through a request under the Freedom of Information Law, Bruno and his top aides used the state air fleet 11 times in the first five months of the year compared with 19 flights by Spitzer during the same period. The flights for both elected leaders continued in June, according to interviews.

Each helicopter flight is worth thousands of dollars, according to aviation consultant Bill de Deckcker, who said the State Police Bell 412s Bruno and Spitzer used would cost $3,000 hourly if hired from private firms.

Three of Bruno’s 14-mile, one-hour helicopter flights to Manhattan in May were on dates that Republicans hosted major fund-raisers, two of which featured Bruno, the effective head of the state GOP.

On May 3, Bruno and three aides — Michael Avella, Jeff Lovell and John McAville — were flown by two State Police pilots and dropped at a helipad at West Street, the records state.

 Bruno hosted the 33rd Annual Spring Reception of the State Senate Republican Campaign Committee at the Sheraton that day. A reception, costing $1,000 per person, began at 5 p.m. A private reception costing $5,000 per person began at 5:30 p.m.

The investigation said in a memo that he picked up the foursome at the hotel at 7 a.m. that day, took them to Aqueduct Racetrack in Queens, and delivered them to Laguardia Airport at 10 a.m. when a State Police aviation crew flew them back to Albany.

On May 17, Bruno and his three aides left the Exit 21 helipad at the Thruway Authority headquarters in Albany at 11 a.m. aboard the executive of the Bell helicopters.

At 12:30 p.m. a State Police investigator in Manhattan brought Bruno to a meeting at C.V. Starr & Co. on Park Ave.

The company’s leader is A.C. Greenman, Maurice E. Greenberg. A.C. had been a generous contributor to state Republican campaigns. State Police then transported Bruno to the Sheraton, where he spent the night.

From 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Bruno and numerous Senate Republicans attended the Annual New York Republican State Committee Dinner at the Sheraton. Participants paid at least $1,000 per person and up to $10,000 per couple to hear U.S. Sen. John McCain and former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani speak.

State Police flew Bruno’s group back to Albany the next morning at 9 a.m. with Bruno’s spokesman Kris Thompson replacing Avella on the one-hour return trip.

On May 24, Bruno and his aides — Avella, Lovell and Steve Bogess — left Albany on the helicopter at 12:30 p.m.

A State Police investigator drove them from a downtown helipad to New York City Hall.

They were transported to a meeting at the Sheraton Hotel and then to a dinner at Russo’s Restaurants, the investigator’s memo said. From 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. the Food Industry Reception at Russo’s Restaurant honored Bruno.

Checks were collected for the New York State Republican Campaign Committee’s housekeeping account at Russo’s. The invitations noted that corporate contributions did not apply toward the $5,000 corporate calendar year limit.

The State Police investigator picked up Bruno at the restaurant around 7 p.m. His group was taken back to Albany on the helicopter about 7:20 p.m.

Bruno spokesman Mark Hansen would not discuss the trips or suspension, or a civil penalty of up to $10,000 and the value of the gift or benefit.

The state penal law can also come into play when someone defrauds the state, as former Comptroller Alan Hevesi was found to have done last year.

Disclosures last fall of Hevesi’s use of state personnel to chauffeur his wife, who he claimed needed security, led to the end of Hevesi’s three-decade career in government. He made restitution of more than $200,000, plus interest to fraudulent and paid a $5,000 fine for his convicted.

Last fall, Bruno forcefully called for Hevesi to resign and reimburse the state for using a staffer as his wife’s driver before prosecutors completed an investigation. He also declared that it wasn’t “an appropriate question” ask him if he had ever used drivers, too.

At least part of one of Spitzer’s trips was political. A portion of one of the seven flights Lt. Gov. David Paterson took included a brief political stop. But neither Democratic leader engaged in personal fund-raising, and their spokesmen said they would not do so on the state taxpayer’s dime.

Other top elected and legislative officials — including Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver — did not request or receive rides aboard state aircraft, records show.

Spitzer spokesman Don Dopp said the planes are provided when available, and are supposed to be used only for government business. The governor, he said, would only use private planes for fund-raising events.

The Spitzer administration rejected documentation of the purpose of state-related trips by non-executive staff, a departure from previous administrations.

Dopp would not discuss Bruno’s use of the planes.

“Our will review this matter carefully before commenting,” he said. He and State Police officials wouldn’t say if Hevesi was entitled to regular State Police security details or if the administration had been alerted that someone had threatened Bruno’s life.

David Catalano, a spokesman for Gov. George Pataki, said Bruno, who used state planes dozens of times each year during the Republican governor’s tenure, would call to place a request for the aircraft.

“We’d assume that they were using it for the appropriate purposes,” Catalano said. “Everyone knows the rules: You’re not supposed to use it for political events.” He said he had never heard of any death threats against the senator.

Spitzer and Paterson provided daily itineraries for the flights used public planes.

During a day stop in Binghamton and Rochester on April 10, the State Police Aviation Unit brought Spitzer and four aides to the Monroe County Democratic Committee dinner, the records show.

The Democratic event, one of 13 stops on the first-term Democrat’s schedule that day, was a fund-raiser for the county party costing $75 for community members and $100 for all others.

More than 500 people attended, said Derek Murphy, a committee staffer.

Paterson, during a multi-event day in Washington, D.C. for the National Lieutenant Governor’s Association Winter Meeting, also went from government business. He scheduled a half-day tour with Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean at Dean’s office near the Capitol. But the visit was cut short.

“The trip had nothing to do with fund-raising of any kind,” said Charles J. O’Byrne, a spokesman for Paterson. He said Paterson spoke with Dean for about three minutes on the sidewalk outside his office.

Dopp, the Spitzer spokesman, said the governor conducted several public and private meetings during the two-county trip that included the Monroe County party dinner. The trip did not involve personal fund-raising, he said.

Bruno’s refusal to detail his activities is troubling, said Russ Haven, legislative counsel for the New York Public Interest Research Group.

“We’ve always called for an independent entity to oversee cases like this, or any allegations of breach of the ethics laws on the Public Officers Law,” said Russ Haven, legislative counsel to the New York Public Interest Research Group. “At a minimum, there needs to be a public explanation.”

James M. Odato can be reached at 654-5083 or by e-mail at jobato@timesunion.com.
FLIGHT REQUEST INFORMATION

REQUESTED AIRCRAFT: Helicopter

REQUESTER: Governor Joseph D. Paterson

OFFICE CONTACT: Ballia King – 425-3535

DATE: 3/28/2007 TIME: 1:00 PM DEPART: Albany, NY ARRIVAL: West 30th St., NYC

PURPOSE OF FLIGHT REQUEST

Legislative business meetings.

I hereby certify that the statements above are true and accurate.

SIGNATURE OF REQUESTOR

APPROVED BY THE CHIEF OF STAFF TO THE GOVERNOR

10291

PC / PH

7028
Transportation Assignment for Senator Joseph Bruno

May 03 and 04, 2007 – Investigator John G. Colon

May 03, 2007

2:00PM – Arrived West 30th Helipad with three staff members
All transported to meetings at the Sheraton Hotel (7th Ave & 52nd St)

7:00pm - Dinner at Italian Restaurant on Eastside (unknown name, located between 1st Avenue and 2nd Avenue in upper 40s)

11:00pm - All subjects transported back to Sheraton Hotel

May 04, 2007

7:00am - Transported all subjects from Sheraton to Aqueduct Racetrack

11:00am - Depart from Aqueduct to Laguardia Airport (Marine Air Terminal)

End of Assignment

*All times approximate
MEMORANDUM
STATE OF NEW YORK
EXECUTIVE CHAMBER

FLIGHT REQUEST INFORMATION

AIRCRAFT REQUESTED: Helicopter
(helicopter or plane request is subject to schedule and weather changes)

REQUESTOR: Senator Joseph L. Bruno

OFFICE CONTACT: Leslie Xing - 455-3191
(contact name and phone number for requesting office)

DATE        TIME       DEPART FROM       ARRIVE AT
            (helipad or airport) (helipad or airport)
Thurs., 5/17 11:00 am    Exit 22, Albany     West 30th St., NYC
Sat., 5/19   9:00 am    West 30th St., NYC   Exit 22, Albany

PASSENGERS TRAVELING: Senator Bruno, John McFarland, Jeff Lovell, Mike Avilla.
(For the return, Kris Thompson replaces Mike Avilla.)

PURPOSE OF FLIGHT REQUEST:
(Please indicate the official state business reflected on your schedule during the hours between
landing and departing from the arrival city, and advise the Chief of Staff of any changes.)

Legislative business meetings.

I hereby certify that the statements above and in the attachment are true and accurate.

[Signature]

SIGNATURE OF REQUESTOR

APPROVED BY THE CHIEF OF STAFF TO THE GOVERNOR

YES    NO

05/18/2007
Trip to NYC - Thursday, May 17th & Friday, May 18th - 2007

Senator Bruno, Mike Avella, Jeff Lovell, & John McArdle

**Thursday, May 17th**

11:00 am  Helicopter (N430NY) leaves from Exit 23, Albany.

12:00 pm  Helicopter lands at West 30th St, NYC.

**Driver:** The NYS Police will pick you up and take you to/from all meetings.

12:30 pm  C.V. Starr & Co., 399 Park Ave., 17th Flr., NYC (212-759-5999).

3:30 pm - Overnight  Sheraton New York Hotel, Seventh Ave. at 52nd St., NYC (212-581-1060).

**Friday, May 18th**

9:00 am  Helicopter (N430NY) leaves from West 30th St., NYC. (Kris Thompson will replace Mike Avella on the helicopter for the return flight.)

10:00 am  Helicopter lands at Exit 23, Albany.
Annual New York Republican State Committee Dinner

Thursday, May 17, 2007
6:00 pm - 9:00 pm

New York Sheraton Hotel and Towers
811 Seventh Avenue
(between 52nd and 53rd Streets)
New York City

Invited Keynote Speaker
Senator John McCain

With Special Guest
Former Mayor Rudy Giuliani

Reception and Dinner: $1,000 per person
Host Committee Reception & Dinner: $10,000 per couple
FLIGHT REQUEST INFORMATION

AIRCRAFT REQUESTED: Helicopter
(helicopter or plane request is subject to schedule and weather changes)

REQUESTOR: Senator Joseph L. Bruno

OFFICE CONTACT: Leslia Xing - 465-3151
(contactor name and phone number for requesting office)

DATE       TIME       DEPART FROM (helipad or airport)       ARRIVE AT (helipad or airport)

Thurs., 5/24  3:30 pm   Exit 23, Albany          West 30th St., NYC

FRI., 5/25  7:15 am   West 30th St., NYC    Exit 23, Albany

PASSENGERS TRAVELING: Senator Bruno, Steve Boggs, Mike Avella, & Jeff Lowell

PURPOSE OF FLIGHT REQUEST:
(please indicate the official state business reflected on your schedule during the hours between helipad and departing from the arrival city, and include the Chief of Staff if any changes)

Legislative business meetings.

I hereby certify that the statements above and in the attachment are true and accurate.

[Signature]

SIGNATURES OF REQUESTOR

APPROVED BY THE CHIEF OF STAFF TO THE GOVERNOR

[Signature]

06/21/2007 THU 19:00 [TX/NI NO: 2825] Q:026
Transportation Assignment for Senator Joseph Bruno

May 24, 2007 – Investigator Robert J. Swansen

3:30PM – Arrived at Downtown Heliport and transported to meeting at City Hall

4:45PM – Transported from City Hall to meeting at Sheraton Hotel (Seventh Avenue and 52nd Street)

6:15PM – Dinner at Russo's Restaurant (Seventh at 50th Street)

7:00PM – Transported from Russo's to West 30th Street Heliport

7:20P – Departed from Heliport

End of Assignment

* All times approximate
You are Cordially Invited to a Food Industry Reception

Honoring

NEW YORK
SENATE MAJORITY LEADER
JOSEPH BRUNO

Thursday, May 24, 2007
6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

Russo's Restaurant
790 7th Avenue at 51st Street
New York City

GMA/FPA Suggested Contribution Level $5,000

For more information or to RSVP contact:
Scott Yach at (212) 693-5965 or scott@food-food.org

Please make checks payable to:
NYS Senate Republicans Campaign Committee – Housekeeping account
PO Box 7229
Albany, New York 12224

* Corporate contributions to the NYS Senate Republicans Campaign Committee – Housekeeping are
  acceptable and do not apply towards the $5,000 corporate calendar year limit