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Lawmaker's travel criticized

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Opponent says Westwood spent too much

COVINGTON – Republican Sen. Jack Westwood has traveled excessively on taxpayer-funded trips over the last decade, his Democratic opponent has charged.

Covington Democrat Kathy Groob said Westwood, from Crescent Springs and in his third term, has spent nearly \$50,000 in taxpayer money since 1997 on trips to legislative conferences while the state “continues to experience an economic downturn.”

Groob is challenging Westwood in Kenton County's 23rd Senate District.

“While Jack Westwood calls himself a fiscal conservative, he's been spending an excessive amount of taxpayer dollars on trips to conferences,” Groob said in a statement. “The average number of legislator trips is

a couple or three per year and Jack Westwood took eight trips in 2007.

“It looks to me that Jack Westwood has taken every perk he can while Kentucky's economy is in decline,” she said.

Westwood and the Senate's top Republican, Senate President David Williams, defended the trips.

In an e-mail, Westwood said legislators from both parties take trips to legislative conferences.

“Legislative conferences are an invaluable resource to lawmakers across this nation,”



Westwood said. “Having the opportunity to maintain a dialogue with legislative leaders from other states is beneficial to finding solutions for problems facing this commonwealth.”

Westwood said that trips to Arkansas and Washington provided him information and guidance on an early literacy bill he sponsored. It was eventually signed into law.

“The bill has drastically improved the levels of literacy for young elementary school students across Kentucky,” Westwood said. “These meetings are part of the job. It's not luxurious, it's work.”

Williams said that he encourages members of both parties to take trips to legislative conferences. Westwood, a retired educator and member of the Senate

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education committee, collects information about education and other topics while at conferences.

“The majority of Jack's travel has to do with education,” Williams said Monday. “Each and every one of his trips has been appropriate.”

“These are not pleasure trips. These are issue-oriented. I think everyone who knows Jack knows he is not a party animal. That's not why he is going on trips.”

Using reports from the Legislative Research Commission in

Frankfort, Groob's campaign compiled this information about the taxpayer-funded trips taken by Westwood:

■ Westwood has made 41 out-of-state trips since 1997, including eight trips in 2007.

■ The trips cost taxpayers \$48,577 for expenses that included airfare, hotels, meals and salary.

■ Destinations included Miami, Orlando, Hilton Head, S.C., Washington, New Orleans, Seattle, San Francisco, San Diego, Philadelphia, Atlanta and Boca Raton, Fla.

Sen. Julian Carroll, D-Frankfort, said Monday he was “absolutely astounded” at the number of trips Westwood has taken, particularly last year.

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“That's an amazing number of trips, with a lot of them to what I would call amusement sites,” Carroll said. “I think he has some explaining to do about why he has spent so much of the taxpayers' money.”

Since all legislator travel must be approved by the Senate president, Williams also has culpability, Carroll said.

“I thought (Williams') policy was three trips a year for legislators,” Carroll said. “Quite frankly, I even think that is excessive. I've taken three trips in four years.”

Williams called Carroll a “political liar” and said no rules exist about how many trips a legislator can take in one year.

Groob also complained that

many of Westwood's trips are to conferences sponsored and organized by the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC. She said ALEC “is a right-wing conservative organization that pushes legislation that favors big business and rollbacks to environmental regulations.”

ALEC is made up mainly of Republican lawmakers, favors school vouchers and is heavily funded by corporations that want their agendas and concerns heard by ALEC members, Groob said.

But in a 2003 letter, Legislative Research Commission director Bobby Sherman urged legislators to attend legislative conferences, including those by ALEC.

“Annual legislative conferences are the primary educational opportunities available to state legislators

wishing to improve their abilities to serve,” Sherman wrote. “We are all aware of the criticisms faced through attendance at national conferences. Traditionally, some in the press have and will question their value. I could not disagree more.”

Westwood said the chairman of ALEC is a Democrat. And Williams said Groob “would not be comfortable at an ALEC meeting because it is a conservative organization that is for lower taxes, pro-life and Jeffersonian principles of government. She is not for any of those things.”

Kenton County's 23rd Senate District covers Covington, Ludlow, Park Hills, Bromley, Fort Mitchell, Fort Wright, Crescent Springs, Villa Hills, Edgewood, Erlanger, Elsmere and one precinct in Crestview Hills.