

What's in Chicago aldermen's expense accounts

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ABSTRACT

The money – up to \$73,280 for each of the 50 City Council members – comes from a budget line that gives aldermen wide discretion to cover an array of expenses related to official duties. George Cardenas (12th) paid \$10,000 to college student Matt Sanchez – whose father, Al Sanchez, is a former Streets and Sanitation commissioner awaiting sentencing for rigging city hiring to help workers from the defunct Hispanic Democratic Organization.

FULL TEXT

Aug. 16—Chicago aldermen have used their newly expanded, taxpayer-funded expense accounts to hire relatives, lease expensive vehicles and pay for downtown parking, according to a Tribune analysis.

The money – up to \$73,280 for each of the 50 City Council members – comes from a budget line that gives aldermen wide discretion to cover an array of expenses related to official duties. After years of aldermen crying poor, Mayor Richard Daley agreed to more than double those funds to \$3.7 million for 2008 – even as the city struggled with a growing budget hole.

The Tribune analysis of the 2008 expense funds, augmented by other public records and dozens of interviews, showed a broad range in what aldermen deemed necessary spending to do their jobs and serve their constituents. It also raised new questions about political patronage and nepotism on the public dime.

–Twenty aldermen tapped expense accounts for all or part of monthly leases for vehicles that included luxury cars and large SUVs, and 14 paid for downtown parking leases.

–Three aldermen hired relatives, and more than a dozen hired political supporters.

–Several aldermen spent thousands of dollars on political consultants or other experts – including a lawyer advising an alderman on her push to protect zoo elephants.

A handful of aldermen spent far less than their allowance, but half spent more than \$70,000. Those questioned about their expenses expressed few regrets, and some said they need more to run operations in their wards.

Ald. Walter Burnett Jr. (27th) paid his mother, Dorothy Burnett, nearly \$20,000 and said it was for work in his ward office on issues related to seniors, public housing and human services.

"I have no problem helping my mother," Burnett said. "That's my mother. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be here. ... If I could get her Mayor Daley's job, I would get her Mayor Daley's job."

Ald. George Cardenas (12th) paid \$10,000 to college student Matt Sanchez – whose father, Al Sanchez, is a former Streets and Sanitation commissioner awaiting sentencing for rigging city hiring to help workers from the defunct

Hispanic Democratic Organization. That pro-Daley group helped elect Cardenas.

"I met the kid, interviewed the kid, was very impressed," Cardenas said, adding he has many interns including his niece this year.

"Look at what he got paid," Cardenas said. "It's a summer job. ... Give me a break."

Several aldermen likewise played down their use of the expense funds on cars and parking.

Leading the pack in both categories was Ald. Bernard Stone (50th), who spent more than \$16,000 to lease a Lexus 460 sedan and more than \$4,000 for downtown parking.

"You've got to get around, otherwise you are locked in," said Stone, 81, who is chauffeured by an aide because he no longer drives. "You've got to move within the ward. You have to go from place to place. You've got to go downtown. I go downtown every day."

Finance Committee Chairman Edward Burke (14th) was among several aldermen who leased SUVs. Burke paid \$9,712 for the year to lease a Chevrolet Tahoe. Burke also has at his disposal an unmarked Chicago police car as part of a city-funded security detail.

Coincidentally, Burke's committee provides expense-account guidance to all newly elected aldermen.

"We told them what is legal," said Donal Quinlan, Burke's spokesman, who declined to answer questions about the need for the Tahoe. "It is up to them to determine what is appropriate."

Aldermen are not allowed to pocket expense funds, buy cars or pay themselves rent under changes to the rules made after the Tribune highlighted abuses of the expense accounts in the late 1980s.

The ordinance lists allowable expenses, including "reasonable" rent for ward offices, car leasing and parking, office supplies and food for community meetings. But it also includes an open-ended clause allowing payment of "miscellaneous, ordinary and necessary expenses incurred in connection with the performance of an alderman's official duties."

Aldermen have interpreted that to include everything from cell phones for staff members to public relations firms that handle newsletters and media calls.

Although Chicago is known for its fine Lake Michigan tap water, half of the City Council members purchased bottled water of one type or another with expense money. Burnett spent more than \$1,200 – more than any other alderman.

He said he keeps a water cooler that dispenses both cold and hot water in both his City Hall and ward offices, in part as a convenience to constituents. Having the cooler also helps ensure the maximum work out of his staff, because they do not have to leave for coffee or tea, he said.

Beyond the expense accounts, the city pays \$10 million for about 160 full-time aldermanic employees, including a minimum of three full-time employees per council member. Each alderman also gets an office at City Hall.

In the wards though, the line between city business and politics is less clear. Some aldermen acknowledge that by paying all or part of their ward office rent with campaign funds.

Political relationships are not easily discerned from the basic expenses database maintained by the city comptroller, which includes payments, the month they were made and the name of the vendor without any description of the type of expense. Many of the details are buried in mounds of supporting documents, making it harder for the public to figure out if spending was appropriate.

In more than a dozen cases, the city made payments directly to aldermen, their campaign committees or their personal credit cards. Aldermen said the payments were reimbursement for a variety of expenses to serve constituents.

Ald. Sandi Jackson (7th) directed more than \$32,000 in payments to her American Express account.

That card was used to charge airfare and lodging for trips to Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Las Vegas for conventions or meetings attended by Jackson and her chief of staff, Bonita Parker – former chief operating officer of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition founded by Jackson's father-in-law, Rev. Jesse Jackson, records show. Parker now is a member of the Citizenship Education Fund formed by Rev. Jackson.

Sandi Jackson, Parker or both attended conferences put on by the National League of Cities and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Jackson also was among aldermen who attended the International Council of Shopping Centers, held in Las Vegas, to seek new development for their wards.

Jackson said she used an AmEx account to launch her office during her freshman term. She has since canceled the card, after getting accounts set up with the city to make direct payments to vendors, she added.

"The city does not provide you with a card," Jackson said. "I had to use my personal AmEx, especially when we were starting to get our office set up."

Six aldermen tapped their expense accounts to pay for public relations firms and other consultants – for everything from setting up community meetings to expert advice.

Ald. Anthony Beale (9th) spent more than any other alderman on public relations, with more than \$16,000 paid to The Publicity Works, a company owned by longtime Democratic political consultant Delmarie Cobb.

Beale said the company handles media inquiries and puts together his ward newsletter, among other duties.

Ald. Mary Ann Smith (48th) used the expense account to reimburse \$27,428 in costs initially covered by her campaign committee.

Of that amount, more than \$7,000 was spent on computer equipment, and \$20,000 was paid to a lawyer for research on issues ranging from Medicaid fraud to animal cruelty. Smith has garnered headlines for her ongoing efforts to pass an ordinance to curb alleged abuse of circus elephants.

Smith said she has a reputation for frugality.

"There's a slogan in my office: Every nickel's a prisoner," she said.

Tribune reporters Dan P. Blake and Dan Mihalopoulos contributed to this report. hdardick@tribune.com

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