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Ethics panel fines Sea Shell for work under Romero

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The state Board of Ethics for Elected Officials on Thursday voted unanimously to impose a \$15,000 fine against Sea Shell Inc. for entering into contracts with Iberia Parish while Craig Romero was parish president.

The board ruled that because Sea Shell is owned by Romero's siblings, the contracts with the parish under his administration violated the ethics code.

In Thursday's decree, the board suspended \$5,000 of the \$15,000 fine, con-

tingent upon future compliance. The board also consented to a request by Sea Shell President Lynn Romero to pay the fine in three installments.

BOARD ATTORNEY Pat Douglas said that the burden of penalty is on the family company rather than the parish because state law prohibits a corporation owned by family members of a public servant from bidding or entering into a contract with the political entity.

The board cited conflicts in three different deals between the parish and Sea Shell, including a \$176,478 con-

tract for the cleanup of Hurricane Andrew.

Craig Romero told The Daily Iberian that at the time the parish had to adopt emergency purchasing orders to get the parish dug out of the debris from the hurricane.

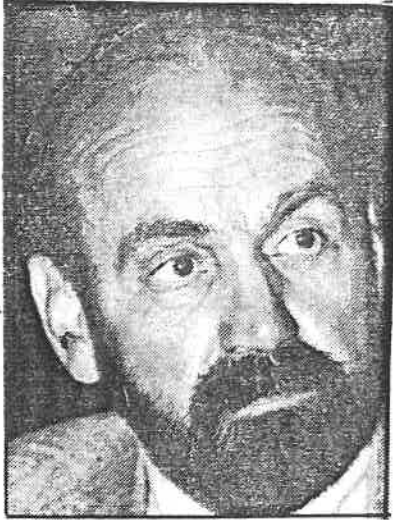
"What happened when the storm came is we hired anybody and everybody who was able to move debris and trees," he said. "It was a bad situation, and we didn't think twice about putting people to work."

IN 1986, SEA SHELL was the subject of a public hearing before the

Board of Ethics for selling material to the parish from 1981-1986 — times during which both Craig Romero and his father, the late Francis Romero, served as parish president.

Subsequent to the hearing, the board concluded that Sea Shell had violated the state code of ethics and barred the company from doing any more business with the parish as long as immediate members of the Romero family remained in elected positions with the parish.

Sea Shell appealed, but the Court of (See ETHICS, Page 8)



Sen. Craig Romero

Ethics

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Appeal affirmed the board's decision.

In its Thursday decision, the board acknowledged the "extreme devastation and hardship on the parishes in South Louisiana" caused by Hurricane Andrew, but stated that there is no exception to the ethics code.

ROMERO SAID he did what he thought was best "in an extraordinary situation."

"We used every resource available and did everything we could to get the situation back to normal. We had to go about the job of getting the roadways cleared so people could get back to their jobs," he said. "If a storm came again and knocked everything down, I don't know if I'd do anything different."

The board also cited Sea Shell for contracting \$4,043 worth of maintenance for the Iberia Parish Airport Authority.

"I thought that was way off base," Romero said. "The Airport Authority is a separate entity that has no involvement with parish government."

"THEY (THE BOARD) said, 'well, the Parish Council selects board members' — then technically, the Parish Council is in violation. I was in the executive branch and they are the legislative branch. Then they (the board) said, 'well, you carry out what the council does.' The logic gets mind boggling."

"But the law is the law. It's strictly interpreted. There are no clauses in cases of extenuating circumstances such as hurricanes. It's straight and narrow, and I guess that's the way it has to be," Romero said.

On the third point, the board cited Sea Shell for renting the parish a crane for \$700 in March of 1992. The equipment was used to load recycled Christmas trees for the coastal restoration program at Weeks Bay.

Romero said that at the time the program's coordinator, Ruth Fontenot, did not know the parish was prohibited from doing business with Sea Shell.

