

## 4 charged with illegal donations

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By **RICHARD K. DE ATLEY** and **MICHELLE DeARMOND**  
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A top Inland Republican campaign contributor and three of his car dealership workers have been charged with laundering more than \$50,000 in illegal contributions to six GOP candidates, according to an indictment unsealed Monday.

Mark A. Leggio, 43, of Upland, made a brief voluntary appearance in San Bernardino County Central Court, where he and the other defendants were handed copies of the 37-count indictment.

The contributions were made to a state Board of Equalization race and to Assembly and state Senate races, including those of current state Sen. Bob Dutton, R-Rancho Cucamonga, and 2006 Assembly contender Brenda Salas, the mayor of Banning.

None of the six candidates is suspected of any criminal conduct and there was no evidence they had any idea the contributions may have been illegal, authorities said.

Leggio is the part owner of Mark Christopher Auto Center in Ontario, Mountain View Chevrolet in Upland, and Diamond Hills Auto Group in Banning.

Also named in the indictment are James Lloyd Deremiah, Nick Vito Cacucciolo, and his father, Nicola Cacucciolo.



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Mark Leggio is charged with getting around campaign-finance laws by giving the maximum, then reimbursing others for donations.

Phone calls seeking comment from attorneys representing the men were not returned Monday evening. The four did not enter any pleas and were released on their own recognizance. Pleas are expected at a July 11 arraignment.

If convicted of all charges, Leggio could face up to six years and eight months in prison. The other defendants could face up to three years.

Nick Vito Cacucciolo was identified as the general manager and part owner of Mountain View Chevrolet, where his father Nicola also works. Deremiah is a former employee of Mark Christopher Chevrolet, said Deputy Attorney General Michael Cabral.

Cabral is a Riverside County deputy district attorney who has been "cross-designated" to work with the state attorney general's office, which is prosecuting the case.

San Bernardino County District Attorney Michael Ramos recused himself from the case. Mark Christopher Auto Center gave Ramos four campaign contributions over the past six years. In all, Ramos got \$30,000 for his district attorney's race from Leggio's business.

Susan Mickey, spokeswoman for Ramos, said Monday that the district attorney regarded Leggio as a longtime supporter and a friend. Ramos kept his office out of the investigation "to avoid any hint of impropriety," she said.

### **'Major Donor'**

Leggio is classified as a "major donor" because he contributes \$10,000 or more in any calendar year, and must file special forms with the state Fair Political Practices Committee.

Leggio is considered "the center of this," said Senior Assistant Attorney General Gary W. Schons.

"It's a major money-laundering case," he said.

The charges claim violation of state laws capping the amount one person can contribute to a campaign, plus perjury for filing false major donor statements with the Fair Political Practices Committee.

Schons said the scheme involved a maximum contribution by Leggio, followed by more money from the other defendants, whom Leggio would then reimburse.

"So essentially, he is contributing twice the legal limit," Schons said.

The limits for campaign contributions during the 2002 to 2006 period authorities investigated ranged from \$3,200 to \$3,600, and Leggio used his employees and others to go over that limit, Schons said.

Schons and Cabral declined to say what they thought Leggio's motives might have been.



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Nicola Cacucciolo, left, and his son Nick Cacucciolo, stand outside a San Bernardino courtroom on Monday. The two are employees of Mark Christopher Auto Center in Ontario.

## **The Indictment**

The indictment outlines one series of actions that begins July 5, 2006, with Leggio issuing a \$10,000 check to Nick Vito Cacucciolo. On the same day, Cacucciolo issued \$3,300 checks to two individuals "in reimbursement for contributions to the Committee to Elect Brenda Salas."

The defendants made contributions to several state campaign committees in the Inland area, including two committees for Dutton: in his 2002 race for the Assembly, and his 2004 run for the state Senate, both of which he won.

Bill Leonard, a former legislator, received contributions for his successful bid for the state Board of Equalization in 2002. Assemblyman Anthony Adams, R-Hesperia, received donations for his 2006 campaign for the 59th Assembly District.

Salas received money in her failed bid for the 65th Assembly District in 2006. Alan Wapner, an Ontario city councilman, also received money in a failed run in 2004 for the 61st Assembly District seat. Elia Pirozzi, a Rancho Cucamonga Republican, received contributions in his tight race in the 63rd Assembly District before losing in 2004.

The 18-month investigation was started by the Riverside County district attorney's office, which contacted the state attorney general's office as the case widened into the jurisdiction of two counties.

It was the amount and source of money flowing into Salas' 2006 Republican primary campaign that caught attention, District Attorney Rod Pacheco said Monday.

Usually campaign contributions for such races are local, Pacheco said.

"There was a lot of money pouring into that race and it was flying in from all over the place," Pacheco said.

Schons said Salas got the largest amount of suspect money, \$15,000.

Pacheco said he put district attorney's Investigator Stephen Kirby on the case beginning in November 2006.

Kirby eventually met with several people, including Deremiah and the Cacucciolos, and got enough information to obtain a search warrant for bank records, the indictment said.

The indictment contains 11 felony charges including perjury and filing false documents, plus 26 misdemeanor charges alleging violations of the Political Reform Act.

### **Fundraising Efforts**

Leggio is a prominent member of the Inland business community and well-known for his political largesse. He met then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush once at the Mission Inn and later got a personal phone call at home from Bush, encouraging Leggio to vote for Bush for president in 2000.

Leggio was a delegate to the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia and to the 2004 convention in New York.

Leggio served early in Salas' Assembly campaign as her honorary campaign-finance chairman, raising questions at the time about his dual involvement with her campaign and the Committee Against Corruption, an independent group funded largely by Leggio.

Committees making independent expenditures in a legislative race are not supposed to coordinate with the candidates. Salas' campaign said at the time that there was no coordination with the two committees and that Leggio's position with the campaign ended.

Most of the Committee Against Corruption's money went to try to defeat Salas' opponents in the 2006 race. She lost to now-Assemblyman Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley.

The Fair Political Practices Commission, the state's watchdog agency on campaign finance, usually handles investigations into these types of cases. Commission officials said they were looking into the matter.

The commission has the ability to levy heftier fines than the court, but doesn't have the ability to send someone to prison.

It fined Mark Christopher Auto Center in 2002 and 2005 for failing to properly report late contributions and for failing to file a semi-annual campaign report. In all, Leggio's business was ordered to pay \$5,000 for four violations.

Bob Stern, president of the nonpartisan Center for Governmental Studies in Los Angeles, said money-laundering campaign finance cases are rarely prosecuted in criminal court.

"It's very difficult to find out, but it's the worst violation of campaign-finance law there is," he said.

Donors who launder money are violating campaign contribution limits by giving more than is allowed and are violating disclosure laws by hiding their identities behind whomever helps them launder the money, Stern said.

"That's as bad as you get," he said.

### **The Indictment**

**Handed up:** By the criminal grand jury of San Bernardino County on June 11; unsealed Monday

**Defendants:** Mark Leggio, James Lloyd Deremiah, Nick Vito Cacucciolo, and Nicola Cacucciolo

**Felonies:** 11 charges, including perjury and filing false documents

**Misdemeanors:** 26 charges, alleging violations of the Political Reform Act

**If convicted on all charges:** Leggio could face up to six years and eight months in prison; the other defendants, three years