

Senate president skips builders dinner due to Web site comment

By Charlie Whitehead

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Lee, Collier, Charlotte and DeSoto County builders will honor State Sen. Mike Bennett with a dinner at the posh Sanibel Harbor Resort tonight, but the event might be as remarkable for who's not there as for who is.

Invitations distributed weeks ago listed Senate President Ken Pruitt as the guest speaker for the event, but the Port St. Lucie Republican canceled a few days ago. Pruitt's office says his cancellation is due to statements by the Florida Home Builders Association Political Action Committee.

"He was going to attend," said spokeswoman Kathy Mears. "He declined after a message appeared on the home builders' Web site."

That message flatly stated the organization would financially support only those legislators who sponsor specific impact fee reforms.

The Florida Home Builders Association issued an apology, also pointing out the state PAC is a separate entity. The apology came too late for Pruitt.

"Under the circumstances, at this time he felt it was inappropriate to attend," Mears said.

Michael Reitmann, executive director of the Lee Building Industry Association, said Pruitt shouldn't blame Southwest Florida builders for what one person with the state PAC said.

"An individual made a statement," he said. "And the PAC is at arm's length from the builders association. It has its own board of directors. This event is a Southwest Florida event honoring Mike Bennett."

Reitmann said Bennett has been a constant supporter of the building industry. An electrical contractor himself, Bennett has pushed unsuccessfully for impact fee reforms two years in a row. His soft money group has also pumped money into the campaigns of pro-development candidates in Southwest Florida and elsewhere in the state.

Reitmann said the apology should have been enough for Pruitt.

"I don't think we should be thrown under the bus because one individual made an error."

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