

Caucus backs speaker

Lawmakers sticking with Rep. Black

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positions, including Earle, who chairs the Appropriations Committee and is vice chair of the Aging Committee. Another Charlotte lawmaker, Pete Cunningham, is special assistant to Black and is ex-officio member of every House committee.



Womble

"Jim Black has gone a long way to accepting their interests in order to stay speaker of the House," said UNC Charlotte political science chairman Ted Arrington. "He's gone a long way to satisfy African Americans to let them know he's on their team."

"I have only experienced good cooperation... and respect from him," said Rep. Larry Womble (D-Forsyth). "I have found him accessible when I had concerns. My support is still with Speaker Black until something else concrete comes up."

The State Board of Elections accused Black and a political action group made up of optometrists of collecting blank checks from optometrists and filing them

in as campaign contributions for favored candidates. The board ruled last month the maneuver violated disclosure laws; Black maintains it's within state statutes.

A federal grand jury has subpoenaed documents from Black's office and heard testimony from state officials, supporters and members of his staff. The State Bureau of Investigation is also looking into whether Black's former political director broke N.C. lobbying laws.

Earle said she believes Black will be exonerated.

"He's been a good speaker. He hasn't been convicted of anything," she said. "It's being played out in the press."

Added Womble: "I'm not asking for his resignation,

although there are those who are. If there's any information or material that comes forward, then I'd have to rethink that."

As a group, the LBC could be in a position of power regardless of what happens to Black, Arrington said. If they stick with him, their support will be a key component of his speakership. If he's forced out, the caucus will be in position to bargain with his potential replacement. The key is to play out their hand until the dealing's done.

"If you jump ship too soon and Black wins, he's going to be (upset)," Arrington said. "If you stay too long, you miss out with the speaker. That's a political Catch-22 that happens all the time."

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