

Federal fine ends Ensign's exit from politics



John Ensign, while a strong supporter of Lake Tahoe, left politics in disgrace.
Photo/LTN file

By Karoun Demirjian, Las Vegas Sun

Two years ago, the Federal Election Commission deciding to fine former Sen. John Ensign \$32,000 for breaking campaign finance laws would have been big news.

But in a week filled with scandals, the first punishment levied on the erstwhile senator failed to stir anyone.

“It’s old news, and the political world has moved on,” said Eric Herzik, a political science professor at UNR. “It’s just a sad end to a sad story.”

The contorted tale of Ensign’s ethically shady steps to extricate himself from a long-term affair with his campaign treasurer – who also happened to be the wife of his chief of staff – gripped Nevada and the nation from when it was first made public, in June 2009, until well after Ensign stepped down in May 2011.

The Senate Ethics Committee excoriated him in a report

detailing how Ensign had enlisted his staffers, family and even his Senate colleagues to help get Cynthia and Douglas Hampton to leave his employ quickly – and flagrantly ran afoul of campaign finance laws and congressional lobbying restrictions in the process.

In comparison to that 68-page tome, the FEC's 10-page report offers few fresh details, save for a more exact itemization of Cynthia Hampton's salary and health insurance cost, and the revelation that Ensign's campaign and political action committee treasurer, Lisa Lisker (who replaced Hampton), was also complicit in failing to report the \$96,000 Ensign's parents gave to Hampton as off-the-books "severance."

The FEC had dropped its case against Ensign in 2010, citing Ensign's parents' claim that they believed the \$96,000 they gave the Hamptons was a "gift."

Soon after, the Department of Justice dropped its investigation of Ensign.

The FEC only reopened its inquiry into the Ensign case after the Senate Ethics Committee released its report two years ago. The Justice Department, however, has not pursued charges against Ensign – and few think the FEC decision will change their minds.

"There's nothing in there that DOJ didn't already know," said Melanie Sloan, executive director of watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, which has publicly criticized the Justice Department for failing to prosecute Ensign and filed a lawsuit seeking the Justice Department's files on the case. "(The FEC decision) doesn't even hold anybody culpable; nobody admits any wrongdoing. There's not anything giving Justice grounds."

The FEC rules by conciliation agreement – a handshake, effectively, between the FEC and the accused individuals – that the charges are fair and final. But there is a clause in

the Ensigns' agreement to ensure that the facts of the case, as laid out by the FEC, can't be considered an admission of guilt.

Prior to the FEC's fine, Douglas Hampton was the only person involved in the Ensign saga to have been sanctioned for his participation in illegal activity.

Hampton, who had been charged with seven felonies, was found guilty of breaking the law that requires former congressional staffers to wait at least one year before lobbying and was sentenced to a year's probation.

Ensign, who was forced to abandon his political career, had otherwise gotten off scot-free.

Few in the political world think Ensign – who resumed his veterinary practice and has otherwise been keeping a low profile since he left Congress – will have to face a further reckoning.

"I would be amazed if there's any more to this story. Ensign has moved on. The political world's moved on. If anybody wants to go after John Ensign, I think it would be viewed as kind of piling on," Herzik said. "You look back at it with a couple of years' perspective, and there was no scandal here except the personal stupidity of John Ensign."

"I think it's just water under the bridge. If he were still in office, that's a different ball game," said David Damore, political science professor at UNLV. "But out of sight, out of mind. There's been like 15 scandals since then."