

Cypress board members deny charges from Lewis

|By JULIA ROBB, Special Projects Editor|

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

Cypress Valley Navigation District board member Vernon Lewis charged at a Monday board meeting that some board members are, or have, benefited financially from The Caddo Institute.

Lewis repeated his remarks in a later interview.

Lewis inferred board members who he said had benefited were those who opposed a resolution asking the government to take grant money given to the institute and give it to the navigation district.

Tuesday, three board members denied Lewis' claims. Lewis was not available for comment.

Board member Paul Fortune, who voted against the resolution, said he helped renovate a building for the institute about five years ago and was paid to do so.

Fortune owns a Karnack construction business.

Other than the one job, Fortune said he has not benefited and has no clue what Lewis is talking about.

"I wish I knew why Vernon Lewis would make such a remark. I do not understand why," Fortune said, adding if he did benefit from the institute, it would not have purchased his vote.

"I have donated time and work for the institute and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," he said.

Fortune said Lewis has made false statements about him in the past, once claiming Fortune, "was party to a suit against AEP in a successful effort to have me removed from the Cypress Valley Navigation District.

"Vernon has made many statements in the past that he intends to take Caddo Lake Institute out. This is nothing more than an effort to hurt the Caddo Lake Institute," Fortune said.

John Nance, a Jefferson resident who voted against the resolution, said he has not "gotten one dime from" the institute.

Richard Lowerre, institute president, said navigation district board member Tom Walker – who voted against the resolution – once organized files for the institute "and I think we paid him something for that, but neither he or Paul have any kind of salary or contract."

"We have asked for volunteers. I have asked Paul to give me a bid to prepare and put up a sign for us because he is in the construction business," Lowerre said.

Walker said he worked part-time for about a month for the institute, "but I have been paid much better elsewhere."

Contact special projects editor Julia Robb via e-mail at: jrobb@coxnews.com; or by phone at (903) 927-8918.