

Boyer, Rachel

From: Ash, Darren
Sent: Wednesday, April 18, 2012 7:06 AM
To: Weber, Michael; Borchardt, Bill; Virgilio - Disabled 5-4-2012 per 574504, Martin; Mamish, Nader; Rothschild, Trip
Cc: Greene, Kathryn; Stewart, Sharon; Corley, Cherrie; Landau, Mindy; Brock, Kathryn; Dyer, Jim; Zobler, Marian; Powell, Amy; Schmidt, Rebecca
Subject: Re: FYI - GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE ARTICLE ON CONGRESSMAN ISSA's REQUEST FOR CONFERENCE INFORMATION

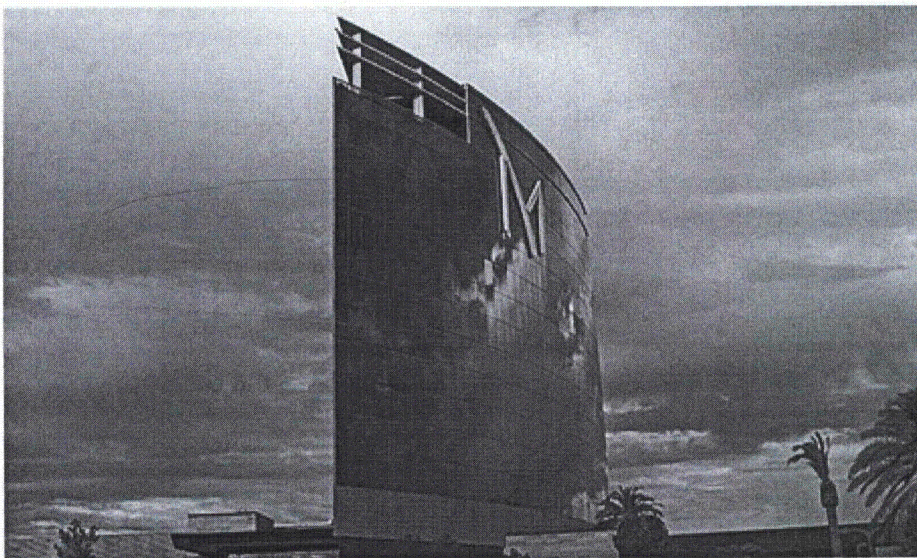
Mike,
I read in a different media source that we were not included in the list of agencies that would receive the letter. The story listed the 23 agencies.
Darren

From: Weber, Michael
To: Borchardt, Bill; Ash, Darren; Virgilio, Martin; Mamish, Nader; Rothschild, Trip
Cc: Greene, Kathryn; Stewart, Sharon; Corley, Cherrie; Landau, Mindy; Brock, Kathryn; Dyer, Jim; Zobler, Marian; Powell, Amy; Schmidt, Rebecca
Sent: Wed Apr 18 07:01:17 2012
Subject: FYI - GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE ARTICLE ON CONGRESSMAN ISSA's REQUEST FOR CONFERENCE INFORMATION

Good morning. In the wake of the GSA scandal, the article below from Government Executive states that Congressman Issa has requested conference information for overnight conferences involving 50 people or more back to 2005. The letter (to Attorney General Holder) is attached. I have not seen a similar letter for the NRC, but presume we *may* be among the 23 agencies on the addressee list. Note that he has asked for the information by next Monday (23 April).

Transparency or 'fishing'? Demand for agency conference data questioned

By [Charles S. Clark](#) 5:14 PM ET



Flickr user exothermic

A far-reaching document request to 23 agencies sent on April 10 by House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Darrell Issa, R-Calif., may be an expensive burden on agencies for a mere “fishing expedition,” observers told *Government Executive*.

As he prepared for this week’s hearings on the General Services Administration’s \$820,000 Western Regions conference in Las Vegas, Issa wrote to the heads of 23 departments and agencies demanding a list of overnight conferences they had funded since Jan. 1, 2005, that were attended by more than 50 employees.

Specifically, he seeks dates, locations, costs and funding sources as well as names, titles and salaries of department event planners. He also wants addresses or live electronic links to all agency website pages that were used to “promote, track or commemorate department conferences.” The material is due by noon on April 23.

As background in his letter, Issa cited President Obama’s 2009 condemnation of “frivolous” spending on out-of-town conferences. Issa targeted GSA and other major departments, singling out the Social Security Administration for past problem conferences and noting coming conferences in Las Vegas by the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Health and Human Services and Defense departments.

Issa also expressed skepticism about the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s recent advertisement to hire an “invitations coordinator” who would make as much as \$102,900 a year to book officials’ appearances.

Such “requests for detailed information often are little more than fishing expeditions, to see what other cases a detailed look might bring,” said Donald Kettl, dean of the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy. “Issa’s request would require a massive investment of government resources -- the request itself could waste far more money than it could save, and it would inevitably create a chilling effect on the very government managers responsible for rooting out and eliminating waste. “

Kettl added, “it’s impossible to defend what GSA did in Las Vegas.” But the agency “has enormous responsibility to leverage billions of dollars of real estate and purchases on behalf of taxpayers. It needs to meet with vendors and landlords, and its staff needs to gather periodically to reinforce the shared mission and to devise smart strategy. In fact, nothing would be more wasteful than *not* meeting -- GSA’s managers would risk being picked off individually by smart private sector operatives who could outmaneuver them if meetings can’t reinforce government policy and strategy.”

Joe Newman, communications director for the nonprofit Project on Government Oversight, said, “there is a need for aggressive oversight of the GSA scandal. In general, we support the chairman [Issa] broadening the scope to include other departments and agencies.” But, he added, “it’s equally important that this not turn into a massive fishing expedition that becomes a drain on resources, and in that regard, limiting the request to overnight conferences attended by more than 50 employees will help do that.”

Paul C. Light, a professor of public service at New York University, says much of the data on agency conferences already exist in the inspector generals’ semiannual reports that could be read by Oversight committee staffers. “They’re pretty dense, so it’s no one’s favorite job,” he said, jokingly adding the

congressional committees could bring in a clown and a psychic "in costume, which would make good television."

But the deeper question, Light said, is why the GSA inspector general didn't use existing authority to alert Congress to the presence of a significant vulnerability using the tool of the seven-day letter. "The IGs are post hoc investigators, but they could have told Issa 11 months ago," or they could have used their authority before then "to simply say this conference is canceled," Light said. The IG's problem in large part is flat or declining staffing levels, he said.

The GSA conference in the end "is small potatoes, a micro-scandal representing something deeper about the system," Light said, citing such issues as what is wrong with the government's personnel system and chain of accountability.

GSA, meanwhile, is reacting with steps that go further than simply preparing documents for Issa. As acting Administrator Daniel Tangherlini told House panels Monday and Tuesday, GSA has consolidated conference oversight in the new Office of Administrative Services.

The office now is responsible for reviewing contracts for conference space, amenities, proposals and budgets; coordinating with events planners; overseeing awards ceremonies, travel and accommodations; procuring new training for employees on conference planning and attendance.

Mike

Michael Weber
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