Former Pa. Liquor Officials Owe Thousands for Ethics Violations

MARC LEVY, Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Three former top officials at the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board must pay the state thousands of dollars for various gifts, such as dinners and golf trips, they accepted from alcohol marketers and others, the Pennsylvania State Ethics Commission said Monday.

The Liquor Control Board's former chairman Patrick Stapleton III, chief executive Joe Conti and marketing director James Short violated the ethics law when they did not report accepting the gifs, the ethics commission said.

Under a consent agreement issued by the ethics commission, Short must pay the state $13,586, Stapleton $7,258 and Conti $2,388. Stapleton left the agency in 2012, Conti left last year and Short left last week.

State law also does not allow Liquor Control Board members and staff to accept any gifts from the industry it regulates, ethics commission executive director Robert Caruso said.

The reports, a total of nearly 148 pages, list numerous golf trips, wine tasting trips, dinners, event tickets, trinkets, liquor and more that were offered to the men, much of it by companies that market liquor and wine to the Liquor Control Board. One gift was a $500 iPad.

In 2010 and 2011, Short attended three all-expenses-paid golf trips, one to California and two to Florida, paid for by companies that do business with the Liquor Control Board, the report said. Stapleton accepted $3,000 in donations of liquor to a not-for-profit organization he founded to arrange invite-only weekend get-togethers of "innovative leaders" at places like Hotel Hershey, the report said.

Conti, 59, a former state senator from Bucks County who has set up his own consulting and lobbying business, called the ethics investigation "thorough and fair," and said he intended to abide by it. He served as the liquor agency's CEO from Dec 2006 to July 2013.

He said that half of his fine stemmed from a golf outing for which he had tried to pay his fair share.

"I tried to do the best I could in these matters, and this was an oversight," Conti said.

Stapleton, 58, a lawyer who served as a Liquor Control Board member for 15 years after he was an assistant district attorney in Philadelphia, said he did not feel that

he did anything wrong. The agreement leaves out significant facts, he said, but he declined to be specific and said he would rather not go into it.

"I continue to believe I acted appropriately at all times and recognize that certain interactions with the industry could have been better handled," Stapleton said.

Both men said they never gave favorable treatment to gift-giving vendors that were seeking business from the Liquor Control Board. Short did not immediately respond to a telephone message at his suburban Harrisburg home seeking comment.

The Liquor Control Board's chairman, Joseph Brion, said in a statement that the agency takes the reports very seriously and that he will look to see if there are steps that could prevent another such situation.

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