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Prince George's County Executive Aids Friends

Jack Johnson has awarded contracts and jobs worth millions of dollars to his supporters. He says he is simply hiring "first-class people."

By Cheryl W. Thompson and Ovetta Wiggins, Washington Post Staff Writers, Sunday, August 6, 2006

Pr. George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson, 2006 Photo by Gerald Martineau, The Washington Post

Since Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson (D) took office four years ago, 15 of his friends and political supporters have been awarded 51 county contracts totaling nearly $3.3 million, according to records and interviews.

In several cases, Johnson awarded county contracts to supporters after he failed to persuade the County Council or others to place them in county jobs. He has also created at least a dozen high-profile positions and filled them with supporters, including fraternity brothers. Some of those who received contracts or jobs had no expertise in the field, and others did not produce written reports required by the county.

In one case, Johnson hired a friend's company, which produces a local cable show, to write a report on school construction financing and then gave him two more contracts to evaluate economic trends. He gave a similar contract to his campaign chairman. He hired a golfing buddy to advise him on pension matters and a law school friend to sit on the redevelopment board.

Johnson does not dispute that he has hired friends and given them contracts.

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"What I do is . . . hire first-class people," he said in an interview. "That means they have to be smart, . . . intelligent, and they have to be people of integrity." He prizes commitment to the county, he said, and he does not consider relevant experience to be a requirement.

Johnson, 57, is in the midst of a campaign for a second term, facing former Maryland legislator Rushern L. Baker III in the Democratic primary Sept. 12. A former state's attorney, Johnson has remained highly popular since he took over as county executive, despite chronic crime in some neighborhoods and criticism of the performance of county schools, where his control is limited to determining the budget.

He cites as his accomplishments the county's improved financial stability and beefed-up staffing for police, fire and homeland security. He also closed a deal to build the $2 billion waterfront development known as National Harbor, where upscale residential, retail and office space is expected to lure more high-end development to Prince George's.

County records for Johnson's first term, obtained by The Washington Post under state public records laws, show that he began awarding contracts to people close to him the day he took office in December 2002.

Michael Arrington, 50, the son of Johnson's former campaign chairman, received a $132,000, one-year contract Dec. 2, 2002, to "provide technical advice to the county regarding government affairs," records show. Arrington's father, Henry, also worked for Johnson when Johnson was state's attorney from 1994 to the end of 2002.

In January 2003, Perry Paylor, 37, a former assistant state's attorney under Johnson, won the first of four contracts to act as counsel for the county redevelopment authority, records show. The contacts totaled $397,500 over 42 months. Johnson said Paylor was "just outstanding."

Paylor, who contributed to Johnson's campaign, works for Marcell Solomon's law firm. Solomon is Johnson's former personal attorney and longtime friend.

Even before Johnson was sworn in, Solomon received a three-month, $40,000 county contract to help with the Johnson transition into office. On Feb. 1, 2003, one day after that contract ended, he was given the first of several more contracts totaling $331,250, to serve as Johnson's representative on the board of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, which oversees the region's mass transportation system. Solomon is paid about five times as much as any other WMATA board member.

Last year, the Maryland state prosecutor's office began investigating two county contracts totaling $200,000 awarded to Wilbert R. Wilson, Johnson's longtime friend and current

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campaign chairman. Maryland prosecutor Robert A. Rohrbaugh said the grand jury investigation is still underway, but prosecutors declined to discuss the case.

Wilson, 63, a former sixth-grade teacher who owns a consulting firm, was paid to "evaluate trends in regional, national and global economics." The contract, which ended 18 months ago, required a written report, but the county has no record of receiving one, according to County Attorney David Whitacre.

Wilson, who has contributed $4,245 to Johnson's campaigns, declined to comment and referred all questions to his attorney, Frederick D. Cooke Jr. Cooke said Wilson turned in a report, though he said he did not remember specifics. He declined to release a copy.

"He met with people; he traveled places," Cooke said. "He did the things one would expect someone to do to collect data for economic development."

Another contractor, Robert L. Thomas, a former director of investigations for the IRS, has also come under legal scrutiny. Thomas, 63, received a $70,500, six-month contract in June 2003 to provide financial planning and an "assessment of accounting practices," records show. On Dec. 22, two days after the contract ended, he was named deputy director of the Office of Central Services, which oversees the county's procurement and management of buildings and vehicles. Thomas, who resigned in April 2005, was indicted eight months later on bribery charges connected to the awarding of a county contract. He pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial.

Johnson said in an interview that he did not approve the contract or appoint Thomas to Central Services. "I didn't know him," Johnson said.

Thomas, however, said it was Johnson who gave him the contract and named him to the job. But Thomas, citing the advice of his attorney, declined to discuss his relationship with Johnson.

In Prince George's, the power to award contracts rests with the county executive, not the county council, regardless of the cost. In the District, contracts worth $1 million or more must get D.C. Council approval. In Baltimore, a five-member committee, including the mayor and City Council president, approves contracts.

Most of the contracts that went to Johnson's supporters did not require competitive bidding under the county code, which exempts contracts that go to "experts or specialists."

The system leaves the county council essentially powerless over contracts. "The council has no say," said council member Samuel H. Dean (D-Mitchellville). "We don't see contracts; we don't see the results of those contracts. Contracts are handled by Jack Johnson."

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Council Chairman Thomas E. Dernoga (D-Laurel) said council members rarely know in advance who is receiving contracts.

"It's definitely after the fact," Dernoga said. "It ultimately comes down to the county executive to explain what was done for the money."

Johnson attributed the "tremendous progress" the county has made during his tenure to those he has hired.

"Over the years, I've probably hired a thousand or more people," he said, adding that the success of an organization depends on its employees. When he is hiring, he said, he looks beyond candidates' résumés and considers their values and character in making a determination.

"I know that the people that I've hired are mission-oriented and they can get the job done," Johnson said.

David M. Valderrama, a former Maryland legislator and longtime friend of Johnson's, has received four contracts to advise the county on school construction and economic issues, totaling $247,666 over four years, records show.

"If you were in Jack's shoes, would you award contracts to your enemies?" asked Valderrama, who said he was instrumental in delivering Johnson the Filipino vote in the 2002 election. "Politics is politics."

Valderrama said he met Johnson more than a decade ago when he was an orphan's court judge in the county and Johnson was deputy state's attorney. Over the years, the two became "very good friends," Valderrama said. Last month, Johnson co-hosted a fundraiser for Valderrama's daughter, Kris Valderrama, a Democrat who is running for state delegate from southern Prince George's.

For two years, beginning in May 2003, the county contracted with Valderrama's company, Valderrama's America, to act as liaison with the Board of Education on school construction projects. The contracts totaled $106,000.

Valderrama's America is a local cable news magazine and talk show run from a downstairs bedroom in Valderrama's two-story brick house overlooking the Potomac River in Fort Washington.

"When I was first approached about it, I had second thoughts," Valderrama recalled in an interview. "I had no experience in school construction; I'm the first to tell you that."

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Nevertheless, Valderrama, 73, said he accepted the contracts because he knew he could write a report, which is what county officials wanted, he said.

"I'm out of politics; I don't have to lie," he said. "My job was to write a report."

Valderrama said he flew to Seattle to "pick the brains" of school administrators on alternative funding for school construction. He wrote a seven-page report "plus attachments and exhibits" recommending that the county explore a voter's initiative to raise money for schools. "My recommendation was, you go to the people whenever you need funding for school construction," he said. "It's an old concept."

Johnson never acted on the recommendation, Valderrama said. "At one point, he said he was going to follow up, but he didn't." Valderrama declined to provide a copy of the report to The Post, saying it was Johnson's decision whether to release it.

Johnson said Valderrama "had done a great job" and "gave me a tremendous report."

When the school contracts ended last year, Valderrama was awarded two more contracts to "evaluate trends in regional, national and global economics," an assignment identical to Wilson's. Those contracts, one of which runs through January 2007, total $141,666, records show.

Alfonso N. Cornish, a Johnson appointee who served as a deputy chief administrative officer until he resigned this year, said he began overseeing Valderrama's work five months into the contract.

"When I took over management of that contract . . . I sat down with him, and we came up with what he was supposed to do because there wasn't anything being done," Cornish said. "I don't think he's doing anything now, to be honest with you."

Valderrama disputed that.

"I make recommendations, and that's what it's all about," he said. He has not produced any written reports under these contracts, he said. "It's an ongoing process. But everything is aboveboard."

* * *

Businessman Richard Amatucci and Jack Johnson became friends after meeting "years and years ago," said Steven Novak, the mutual friend who introduced them. They played golf together, and Amatucci hosted political fundraisers for Johnson in 2003 and 2004. Amatucci arranged for the two events, which raised $180,000, to be held at Avenel country club in Potomac, Novak said.

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Amatucci, a Potomac resident, has also made political contributions to Johnson's campaign totaling $4,500 since 2001, according to campaign records.

Seven weeks before he retired from Fannie Mae as vice president of industry technology initiatives in April 2004, Amatucci incorporated his company, the Amatucci Group, records show. The month he retired, he received the first of four contracts with Prince George's. The contracts were to "provide financial professional services in the assessment and review of the performance" of the county's pension system. The contracts totaled $300,000 over two years.

Amatucci, 57, declined to discuss the work he's done for the county, saying that he wrote reports but that it was the county's decision whether to make them available.

"I absolutely have generated reports," he said.

Several county pension trustees said they are unclear about Amatucci's role.

"Someone told me he takes a look at investments, but we hire a company . . . and they produce monthly reports, and they're the ones who make recommendations on diversification of investments," said Ralph E. Grutzmacher, a trustee and a County Council attorney. "So what he adds to that equation, I don't know."

County Council member Dean, who sits on the fire pension board, said he has never heard of Amatucci: "I do not know who he is."

Johnson said Amatucci's company has improved the police and fire pension plans, which were losing money when Johnson took office. "He understands performance," Johnson said.

The county executive said he initiated the contract with Amatucci, who he said had no pension experience. But Johnson pointed out that the former Fannie Mae executive "has been very successful in a large company."

* * *

Shailender K. Gupta, Johnson's campaign treasurer, has won five contracts from the county to assess the finances of Dimensions Healthcare System, a nonprofit organization that oversees the county's three hospitals and a nursing home. The contracts totaled $438,000 for 34 months.

"I'm helping them find out their problems," Gupta said in an interview.

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Gupta, a Greenbelt accountant, said he had no health-care experience before receiving the contracts, but he had attended meetings and "been involved with health care in the county" since Johnson took office. "You learn a lot about health care along the way," he said.

Gupta, 57, has held several fundraisers for Johnson at his Potomac home.

Under the first contract, which began in June 2003, Gupta said he toured hospital sites, talked with doctors and community leaders, and reviewed documents and procedures. He submitted a 100-page report in September 2003 with recommendations for improving the system.

Johnson awarded Gupta the contract to study Dimensions six months after a task force created by the legislature completed its study of Dimensions. Johnson said he wanted someone he trusted to assess the system.

The earlier report, known as the Malouf report, made 10 recommendations for improving Dimensions. Four of Gupta's recommendations mirrored ones in the Malouf report, according to a review of both documents.

"I earned my money," said Gupta, who worked on the study with six others. "People charge two or three million dollars for a report like this."

Since then, Gupta has been given four more county contracts to provide financial services to Dimensions, county records show. The last one ended in June, according to records.

"It's not a question of giving contracts to your friends," Gupta said. "It's a matter of whether the person is qualified."

Samuel Wynkoop, former chairman of Dimensions, questioned the value of Gupta's report.

"There was absolutely nothing in there that hadn't been summarized and brought before the board in other reports," Wynkoop said. "It just didn't have much value." Wynkoop was formerly county environmental resources director but resigned in 2003 when Johnson wanted to bring in his team of administrators.

Calvin Brown, a Prince George's accountant and Dimensions board chairman, questioned why Johnson gave Gupta contracts to study Dimensions for three years after Gupta filed his report.

In a July 5, 2005, letter, Johnson told the Dimensions chief executive that Gupta "will need to continue monitoring the progress of Dimensions in implementing the recommendations in the various reports."

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"Mr. Gupta has no interfacing with my board on a day-to-day basis," Brown said. "He doesn't talk to us at all."

According to Brown, Johnson gave Gupta contracts after failing to get Dimensions to hire the Greenbelt accountant. Brown alleged at a March 2004 Board of Health hearing that Johnson withheld a $5 million emergency payment from the financially troubled Prince George's Hospital Center to try to force Dimensions to hire two friends. Brown told a reporter later that the friends were Gupta and K. Singh Taneja, a member of Gupta's hospital review team.

State's Attorney Glenn F. Ivey asked state prosecutors to investigate Brown's allegations. An Oct. 20, 2004, report signed by Thomas M. McDonough, senior assistant state prosecutor, found "insufficient evidence" to support the claim that Johnson "may have engaged in criminal misconduct in office."

Dimensions hired Taneja, who had health-care credentials, as a senior vice president in February 2004. Gupta was not hired, Brown said.

Four months after the county council approved the emergency payment to Dimensions, and nine days after Taneja was hired, Johnson transferred the $5 million to Dimensions. Taneja declined to comment.

When Johnson wanted to replace People's Zoning Counsel Stan Brown with his appointee in 2003, he contacted the county council with a successor: Christopher S. Randolph. "I am confident that Mr. Randolph has the skills, background and expertise to meet the challenges," Johnson wrote in a Nov. 7, 2003, letter.

Randolph had been an assistant state's attorney under Johnson and has worked at the law firm of Solomon, Johnson's former personal attorney. Randolph had no zoning or land-use experience, council members said.

"The council didn't feel that he had enough zoning experience to be out representing the public interest," said Dernoga, council chairman and a zoning lawyer.

To prevent Johnson from naming Randolph, the council passed a bill in April 2004 giving the council sole authority to make the appointment. The council reappointed Brown, who continues to serve.

When the council made its objections known, Johnson moved quickly to give Randolph the first of three contracts totaling $193,500 over 27 months to provide him advice on zoning matters, records show.

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"I'm not sure what advice he would be getting," said council member Douglas J.J. Peters (D-Bowie), adding that county zoning issues are legislative matters handled by the council. "We have a number of experts on the County Council to help us with our zoning matters."

Johnson said Randolph "watches every zoning issue and informs me on things that are coming." Randolph did not return three phone calls seeking comment.

In Johnson's 2002 run for office, Ronald V. Russell (D-Mitchellville) was the only member of the County Council to endorse him. Two weeks after Johnson took office, he gave Russell, who was leaving the council because of term limits, the first of four contracts. His job was to advise the county on legislation and attend committee and task force meetings, records show. The contracts totaled $176,500 for 15 months. Russell, 46, said he also worked closely on an awards program. "There was something to do every day," he said.

Two days after the contract ended in 2004, Russell said, Johnson appointed him deputy director of environmental resources. Russell said he was a good choice because he "had always been supportive of environmental issues." When asked about his accomplishments as deputy director, Russell said that he "supported the director" of the agency and "initiatives that we had."

Russell said Johnson appointed him this year to another job, as a coordinator on the National Harbor project. "He does an outstanding job," Johnson said, adding that Russell's new responsibilities include overseeing permitting and inspections.

Another Johnson friend to benefit was Wendell Webster, who met Johnson while both were students at Howard University Law School in the 1970s. The two kept in touch after graduating in 1975, and Webster donated $4,000 to Johnson's 2002 campaign, records show.

On June 3, 2003 -- seven months after Johnson was elected -- he named Webster to the county's Redevelopment Authority board, which oversees revitalization projects and pays its members a $400 monthly stipend. Webster, 56, a District lawyer, missed 11 of the 16 meetings during his 18 months on the board, according to minutes.

"Did I miss that many?" he asked. "Probably because of other matters, I wasn't able to attend." He said he was paid his stipend only for the months in which he attended meetings.

While he was on the board, he also received a seven-month, $25,000 county contract to "provide legal services for review, research and advice" for Dimensions Healthcare. "I provided legal insight," Webster said, adding that the contract was "very small."

Last year, Webster was named general counsel of the county's Housing Authority. He said he won the contract through competitive bidding. The contract totals $160,000 a year for the part-

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time position, according to county spokesman James Keary. Johnson said he was proud to appoint Webster because "he's one of the smartest guys I know."

When it came time to pick the head of the Environmental Resources Department in 2003, Johnson passed over his staff's candidate, an engineer from Detroit who had worked with the Army Corps of Engineers, to appoint Donna M.P. Wilson. She was a lawyer for Goodwill Industries, where her duties included teaching courses on legal issues in the workplace. She had also served as ethics attorney to former D.C. mayor Marion Barry.

Wilson had worked closely on Johnson's 2002 campaign on fundraising and has contributed more than $2,400, records show. She and Johnson's wife, Leslie, belong to the same sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. During Wilson's confirmation hearing before the county council, Leslie Johnson showed up and sat in the front row next to Wilson.

The Environmental Resources Department oversees building permits, codes and trash removal and is considered one of the most complicated departments in the county. In many other large counties, including Fairfax and Montgomery, the heads of similar agencies have engineering or environmental management backgrounds.

"I know you can put anybody in a job you want to, but she did not have a background in the area," said Cornish, Wilson's boss, who left the county, saying he was frustrated with the way it was being run by Johnson.

"She was not put before us as an environmental engineer," Dernoga said. "Jack's people billed her as a person who would manage the department and manage the technical people in it."

Dernoga said the council rarely has questioned Johnson about his appointments because "It was his prerogative to pick his administration."

"He's responsible for their performance," Dernoga said. "Some have worked out better than others."

Wilson, 50, has gotten mixed reviews. Robert Boone, president of the Anacostia Watershed Society, an environmental group, said the storm water management program has eroded under Wilson. "The program has been all but dismantled," Boone said.

Wilson disagreed, saying the agency has improved under her leadership.

"I do believe that there have been some positive changes," she said. "I think there are a lot of people who are pleased with the changes and a lot of people who are equally displeased."

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Wilson announced in a July 11 e-mail to her staff that she is resigning, saying she had always intended to serve only one term. Johnson said Wilson had been "very effective" in her job but is leaving because "these jobs will burn you out."

People who worked in Johnson's campaign have frequently been among those to win county jobs.

Keith Washington, 45, a county police corporal, worked on -- and contributed to -- Johnson's campaign, one of the few police officers to do so. Washington and Johnson belong to the same fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, and are occasional dinner partners.

Washington was selected as a member of Johnson's security detail, driving the executive to appointments and events. And in 2004, Johnson chose Washington to fill the newly created job of deputy director of homeland security. Washington said he got the job because of his 20 years in the Army Reserve and his anti-terrorism training, not his personal relationship with Johnson.

"I'm not some political hack who was put in the job because of my contacts," Washington said. "No one has the background that I have in that field."

Johnson said he hired Washington in part because he is "mentally tough."

Chris Osuji, 45, a Nigerian immigrant, worked hard to get Johnson elected, arranging meetings, making introductions and delivering votes from the county's African community. "I did whatever I could," Osuji said. "I love the man."

After the election, Johnson named Osuji director of the county's Office of Community Relations, although he lacked experience in the field.

"I have a passion for serving people," Osuji said when asked about his qualifications.

Pamela H. Piper, 56, met Johnson nine years ago at an event and, as the two made small talk, they realized they had something in common: Both were from the Charleston, S.C., area, and Piper's mother had been Johnson's fourth-grade teacher.

"I was shocked," Piper recalled. "My mother died at a very young age, and he was the first adult that I met that my mother taught."

Piper and Johnson became fast friends. She invited him to Christmas parties and a retirement party. She held a fundraiser for him at her Silver Spring home.

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In 2000, Piper placed a three-bedroom home for sale in Charleston that had belonged to her late uncle. Johnson bought it for $130,000, property records show, and sold it for a $45,000 profit three years later.

"Jack mentioned to me that he was interested in buying a house in Charleston, and I had this one," Piper explained. "He was not given favor in terms of the price."

When Johnson assembled his transition team in 2002, he asked Piper to be on it. She later approached him about putting her on a board, she said. Instead, Johnson gave her a job heading the Office of Central Services.

Piper has for more than a decade owned a technology and management services company that previously was a subcontractor on a Prince George's contract.

"He didn't give me my job because I gave him a fundraiser," she said, citing her qualifications for the job. "Maybe that's how politics works. But that was not my intent when I gave him a fundraiser."

Staff researcher Alice Crites contributed to this report.

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