

📖 **Harris `Circling the Wagons'**

Candidate cancels campaign stops as questions about contractor linger.

By JEREMY WALLACE  
NYT Regional Newspapers

PORT CHARLOTTE -- Already trying to avoid the media, Longboat Key Republican Katherine Harris is now canceling campaign stops in Southwest Florida as questions swirl about her ties to a Washington, D.C., defense contractor at the center of an ongoing national bribery scandal.

Harris, who is running for the U.S. Senate, abruptly canceled a stop in Charlotte County on Saturday, and four other events planned for Lee and Collier counties were removed from her campaign Web site.

It's another sign that Harris' struggling campaign is now in full crisis mode. Political consultants say that shying away from the public right now is also a bad strategy.

"She can't hide and expect this to go away," said David Johnson, a Republican political consultant. "It looks like her campaign is circling the wagons."

Brandon-based political consultant Mark Proctor said he advises clients to hold court early with the media to avoid a story dragging on for a week, as it has with Harris. The longer the story goes on, the more likely it is for voters to remember the issue come Election Day, he said.

Harris may not be talking to the media and staying away from some events, but she is trying to control the damage in other ways. And she recently told her backers that she is making a fundraising push over the next few months.

Harris organized a conference call on Friday with her most loyal supporters in which she downplayed her connections to MZM Inc., saying, "There is nothing to it except for the press trying to be negative."

The company's owner admitted in federal court that he gave

\$32,000 in illegal campaign donations to Harris.

Continuing with the conference call, Harris described a campaign on a roll and gaining momentum daily. She said prominent national politicians, like U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, RTenn., hosted a fundraising event for her in Washington last week, proof that all is well.

"Now there is a buzz in Washington," Harris said on the call.

Harris' ties to defense contractor MZM Inc. have been under the microscope since Feb. 24.

That's the day when MZM founder Mitchell Wade admitted to bribing one member of Congress and giving Harris illegal contributions in March 2004.

Over a private dinner in Washington, D.C., Wade and Harris talked about "obtaining funding and approval" for a Navy counterintelligence program that Wade wanted to open in Sarasota, Justice Department records show.

After that dinner meeting, Harris put in a \$10 million budget request to the Defense Appropriations subcommittee to fund the project. Days later, an employee in Harris' congressional office went to work for Wade at MZM.

The funding for the project never was approved.

Justice Department officials have refused to comment on Harris' role in the investigation, saying the query is ongoing.

Harris still hasn't granted any interviews about the issue, but told supporters on the telephone that she did nothing wrong.

"It was a legitimate project in our district for high-skilled, high-wage jobs," Harris said.

Federal investigators have said that Wade never told Harris that the 16 checks of \$2,000 each in the name of MZM employees and their spouses were obtained illegally.

Harris told her supporters on Friday's conference call that federal investigators have never asked her any questions about Wade or MZM.

While Harris spoke to some of her supporters by phone a day earlier, others waiting for her in Port Charlotte on Saturday were upset that Harris canceled her trip to that county.

"I'm really disappointed," said Charlotte County Republican Party Chairman Bob Starr.

Harris' staff confirmed two days earlier that she would be at a ribbon-cutting to open a new party headquarters in Charlotte.

But Starr said Harris' staff called back to cancel after he had already sent notices promoting the event.

Harris' campaign staff declined to comment, and have offered no explanation for why Harris canceled the Charlotte trip. They also did not say how many other events were taken off her schedule.

Prominent Republicans continue to back her campaign.

"Katherine Harris is going to make a great U.S. senator," U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., said in video greeting to the Manatee County Republican Party last week.

Also in Manatee County, Florida Republican Party Chairman Carol Jean Jordan called Harris the hardest-working campaigner she knows and said she would beat Sen. Bill Nelson, a Democrat, in November.

Even U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., who has been cool to Harris' candidacy, invited Harris to a weekly Republican caucus meeting, usually reserved only for Republican senators. The next day, Harris attended a Washington fundraiser.

"It says the Republican leadership has accepted the political reality that Katherine Harris will be the GOP candidate for the United States Senate," said Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia.

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