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Rangers partner makes land deals

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ARLINGTON — GOP gubernatorial candidate George W. Bush's associates with the Texas Rangers have been directly involved in city efforts to acquire private land for the team's sports-business complex even though Bush has campaigned for landowners' rights.

Mike Reilly, a limited partner in the Rangers, earned \$315,000 in commissions for arranging purchases of land for the complex, records in the condemnation proceedings show. Bush is managing general partner of the club.

Reilly, an Arlington real estate broker, worked with city appraisers to determine land value and advised Rangers president Tom Schieffer about when "we will probably have to initiate condemnation proceedings."

In some cases, Reilly used land he and another Rangers partner bought as evidence appraisers should lower values. Court records suggest his land purchases "at distressed prices" were intended to help lower the value paid to other landowners.

Reilly also suggested one tract could be bought in the name of his own company "also without fear of detection."

Attorneys for landowners fighting condemnation say Reilly's role shows the Texas Rangers are using the governmental power of condemnation for private enterprise. Cities generally are authorized to condemn property only for the public good.

"The fact that the city turned over so many aspects of condemnation to Mike Reilly just proves that this isn't a real public project, this is a private project," Glenn Sodd, an attorney for the landowners, said Thursday.

The case is pending in a Tarrant County court.

Jack Friedman, a Dallas real estate consultant and expert witness in condemnation cases who has no connection to the ballpark case, said Reilly's activities appear to show the condemnation is not for the public good.

"It doesn't seem to pass a test of whether this individual would be acting in the best interest of the public or public agency," Friedman said.

Reilly did not return phone messages left Thursday at his Arlington office.

Stephen Adler, an attorney for the city of Arlington, downplayed Reilly's role in the land deals.

"The offers that the (Arlington Sports Facilities Development Authority) made for the acquisition of property were based solely on independent appraisers," Adler said.

"Those independent appraisers spoke with dozens of people to gather information, and Mike Reilly may have been one of the people they went to for information," he said.

City and Rangers officials argue that the complex will benefit the public, although an agreement between the team and the city allows the Rangers to keep all revenues. Plans for the complex include a 12,500-seat amphitheater, office buildings and a "river-walk" featuring shops and restaurants.

Even though the city will own the land, charging the Rangers up to \$3.5 million a year, the agreement gives the team total control over its use. The agreement also applies up to \$1.5 million of each year's rent to an eventual purchase by the Rangers in as few as 12 years.

Democratic Gov. Ann Richards' campaign has charged that the ballpark land battle contradicts Bush's campaign statements supporting landowners' rights and defies the Texas Republican Party's platform.

Bush has defended the condemnation and accused the Richards' campaign of using it to divert attention from the governor's flip-flop over federal control of several lakes in Texas. Richards initially supported federal intervention, but has since said she opposes such a move.