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Specter told to pay up for campaign air travel

When it comes to enforcing campaign-finance rules against the politicians who control its fate, the Federal Election Commission has a reputation for being more of a lapdog than a watchdog.

Try telling that to Sen. Arlen Specter. Thursday, the FEC ordered his 1996 presidential campaign to pay the government more than \$200,000 for accepting cut-rate airfare from a Hazleton aviation company owned by one of his supporters. The FEC said Specter flew on the firm's four charter planes at discounted rates when he should have paid the full market value.

The finding resulted from an FEC audit required by law when any presidential candidate accepts public funding. Auditors said Koro Aviation Inc. provided \$360,410 worth of charter flights for \$126,642. The FEC voted 5-0 to require Specter's campaign to pay the difference, \$233,768, to the U.S. Treasury.

Specter contended that the campaign reimbursed the company according to Senate ethics committee guidelines and said a hearing was being sought before the FEC to seek a reversal. Failing that, he said the campaign would challenge the agency's finding in court.

"We believe we will be vindicated," he said.

The FEC's finding seems to involve a relatively fine distinction in campaign-finance law between the use of corporate and commercial jets. Ian Stirton, an FEC spokesman, said rules permit candidates to fly on corporate jets provided that they pay the equivalent of first-class fare on a commercial flight.

If they use a jet licensed to carry commercial passengers, as was the case with Specter, they must, in effect, charter the flight at a much higher cost. In those cases, Stirton said, the FEC treats the loss of revenue from the lower fare as an illegal gift by the firm to the politician.

— Chris Mondics, in Washington