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Solyndra-linked fundraiser still boosting Obama campaign

Steven Spinner, a former Energy Department official with ties to the failed solar company, continues to raise money for the president and help organize events.

October 24, 2011 | By Peter Nicholas and Tom Hamburger, Washington Bureau

Reporting from Washington — A former Energy Department official linked to the failed Solyndra solar enterprise deal continues to raise campaign money for President Obama and helped plan a fundraising luncheon that the president will attend in San Francisco on Tuesday.

Steven Spinner, who remains in the top tier of Obama fundraisers, took part in a conference call in recent weeks devoted to planning the event at the W Hotel. He also has joined other Obama fundraising calls, according to a person familiar with Spinner's participation who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment publicly.

An Obama campaign official said Sunday that Spinner did not raise funds for the San Francisco event but is an "active fundraiser for the campaign." He declined to comment on whether Spinner took part in conference calls about the luncheon.

Spinner could not be reached for comment.

His participation is controversial, even among Obama supporters. Some think Spinner should take a reduced role in the campaign given the uproar over Solyndra, but the White House considers it a manufactured controversy being exploited for partisan reasons.

Solyndra, a now-bankrupt manufacturer of solar cylinders, was a showcase for the White House initiative to develop green energy. The California firm received a \$535-million loan guarantee through an Energy Department program that Spinner helped oversee.

Emails show Spinner pushed for a prompt decision on the Solyndra loan as his wife's law firm was representing the company. Administration officials said Spinner recused himself from discussions about the loan guarantee and played no role in the decision.

The FBI and Republican-controlled House committees are looking into Solyndra, which declared bankruptcy and laid off 1,100 employees this summer. Taxpayers may be on the hook for the full amount of the loan guarantee.

In the 2008 campaign, Spinner raised at least half a million dollars for Obama. In campaign finance parlance, Spinner is a "bundler," gathering checks from many individuals and presenting the total to the campaign. Every major presidential campaign has bundlers, often giving them honorific titles and special access to the candidate.

The Obama campaign voluntarily discloses all of its bundlers to the Federal Election Commission. The latest quarterly report listed Spinner at the "\$500,000-plus" level.

Obama leaves Monday for a three-day swing through the West, part of an aggressive fundraising drive. He will stop at six fundraisers altogether, including events Monday in Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

Ticket prices for the sit-down lunch with the president in San Francisco start at \$5,000. A \$7,500 contribution enables donors to attend a photo reception with Obama, the invitation shows. Up to 200 people are expected to attend.

Emails show that Spinner was deeply involved in coordinating a "big event" to announce the approval of Solyndra's loan guarantee. He envisioned "golden shovels, bulldozers, hardhats, etc.," according to an Aug. 20, 2009 email.

That same month, Spinner's boss, Matt Rogers, sent a note to him saying, "Thanks for driving Solyndra."

Obama has defended the loan guarantee as having been made "on the merits." Energy Department officials said Spinner was specifically recused from "engaging in any discussions on decisions affecting specific loan applications" because his wife's law firm represented Solyndra.

One Democratic fundraiser said the White House wasn't apt to worry about Spinner's fundraising role, citing conversations with Obama advisors who regard Solyndra as a made-up controversy that Republicans are trying to exploit. With Obama facing a tough reelection fight, Spinner is among the campaign's proven producers.

"It's a tough fundraising climate, and they regard the Solyndra issue as just partisan politics," said the fundraiser, who requested anonymity to speak freely.

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