

Hershey school watchdog hits Corbett probe timing

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HARRISBURG, Pa.—A watchdog group on Tuesday accused state Attorney General and Republican nominee for governor Tom Corbett of dragging his feet in launching an investigation to protect political allies involved in the purchase of a golf course by the trust that oversees the Milton Hershey School for disadvantaged children.

At a Capitol news conference, representatives of the nonprofit Protect the Hersheys' Children Inc. said Corbett's office ignored concerns it had expressed about the acquisition of the golf course as far back as 2006, the year the golf course changed hands, as well as a long list of complaints about how the school is run.

"His announcement was way too little, far too late," Robert Chalmers of Philadelphia, a graduate of the school, said at a Capitol news conference.

Corbett's office, which oversees Pennsylvania charities, confirmed last week that it had launched a non-criminal investigation of the Hershey Trust Co.

Spokesman Nils Frederiksen said Tuesday the probe began in September, before The Philadelphia Inquirer reported early this month that the trust paid an inflated price of \$12 million for the money-losing golf course. The sale enabled several dozen local investors to profit, including The Hershey's Co.'s then-chief executive officer, Richard Lenny.

School officials said the golf course was bought to provide a buffer zone between student homes at the private boarding school and the outside community.

Frederiksen said the allegations under investigation involve land acquisitions, but stressed the probe is focused on possible civil violations—not crimes—and that the trust has "broad leeway" in deciding whether acquisitions are in the best interest of the school that company founder Milton S. Hershey placed under its control.

"Attorney General Tom Corbett doesn't respond to political pressure. That's not part of the decision-making at this office," Frederiksen said.

The purchase of the financially troubled Wren Dale Golf Club—now called Hershey Links—was approved by a three-member executive committee that included LeRoy Zimmerman, chairman of the trust board, a former two-term attorney general and a Republican.

In a statement last week, Zimmerman defended the transaction and said he believes the facts will show the trust acted appropriately.