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LaTourette's Pro-CAFTA Vote Adding to GOP's Woes  
By Jonathan Riskind

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Rep. Steven C. LaTourette's vote on the Central American Free Trade Agreement last month could be one that haunts him right up to Election Day 2006.

It's not so much that the Madison Republican voted in favor of the free-trade pact. So did almost all House Republicans, including every member of Ohio's GOP delegation -- except Bob Ney of Heath. The problem for LaTourette is why he cast a big-surprise, post-midnight vote for CAFTA, which passed 217-215, with LaTourette supplying the last yes.

The normally unflappable moderate had long been opposed to CAFTA and, as the vote approached, had vowed to hold his ground and oppose another in a series of foreign-trade pacts he viewed as bad for many workers and companies in his northeast Ohio district.

LaTourette told reporters that he changed his mind after a call from the head of KraftMaid, a cabinet-making company in his district. The executive told LaTourette his company was paying an 8 percent tariff on plywood that would be lifted by CAFTA, allowing the 1,000-employee company to better compete against foreign businesses or even expand. LaTourette vehemently denied he was pressured by the White

House or was threatened in any way to vote for CAFTA.

But an article in The Plain Dealer of Cleveland, the largest newspaper in LaTourette's district, seems to have erased the validity of what LaTourette says turned him around; there is an 8 percent tariff on plywood from Central America, but there also are exemptions that make the material duty free. This is confirmed by independent interviews with trade officials and experts and the International Trade Commission's tariff-exemption list.

The newspaper noted KraftMaid is owned by Michigan-based Masco Corp., whose chairman, Richard Manoogian, has been a six-figure GOP donor. KraftMaid wasn't talking about the matter last week, and LaTourette was on vacation and unavailable for comment. But LaTourette's office maintains that he relied on information from KraftMaid and from the office of U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman, the former Republican congressman from Cincinnati. Portman's office backed up KraftMaid's claim by sending LaTourette a list of the 8-percent tariffs that would be lifted by CAFTA.

Rob Lehman, Portman's chief of staff, told The Dispatch there were a host of reasons for LaTourette to decide to vote for CAFTA. For one thing, he said,

"Ohio is a manufacturing state" and CAFTA allows the exporting of products with lower tariffs to Central America. As to the list of import tariffs wiped out by CAFTA, Lehman said his office simply sent on requested information, adding that there was no intention to mislead LaTourette about exemptions that could be used and that Portman had nothing to do with KraftMaid's lobbying of LaTourette.

LaTourette's district is a marginal GOP area that President Bush won by about 6 percentage points -- and where it is now going to be tougher for LaTourette to define himself as a moderate who stands up to the administration.

Ohio's congressional races are likely to be more competitive next year overall because of the scandals besieging the Taft administration and because

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Democrats are likely to field strong candidates, such as Paul Hackett, the Iraq war veteran who almost won an overwhelmingly GOP district in the special election to replace Portman.

Ney, too, could be in trouble. He stood fast in his opposition to CAFTA, but the indictment of much-investigated Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff in association with a casino-cruise-line deal in Florida wasn't good news for the new resident of Licking County.

Liberal activists and Democratic Party organizations have been trying to make much of Ney's ties to Abramoff, including comments Ney put in the Congressional Record in 2000 in support of the Abramoff-engineered cruise-line deal, and they jumped on last week's development.