

# Tampa Bay Times



WINNER OF 10 PULITZER PRIZES

## THE BUZZ

From the staff of the Tampa Bay Times

### Citizens' chief defends foreign travel and draws heat from Scott



Steve Bousquet, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

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Summoned before Gov. Rick Scott and the Cabinet Tuesday, Citizens Property Insurance Corp. president Barry Gilway defended the state-backed insurer's foreign travel.

Scott called for a prohibition on foreign travel by Citizens executives after a series of abuses two years ago. The controversy flared anew after a report in *The Palm Beach Post* that Citizens board chairman Chris Gardner spent two nights in a \$425-a-night resort in Bermuda at a conference with reinsurance investors in April, despite a \$373-per-night cap on Bermuda travel.

After the Post's disclosure, Gardner reimbursed Citizens for the difference in rates of \$104 for the two nights. Citizens officials claim the company first discovered the overcharge.

Gilway said he urged Gardner, an unpaid volunteer, to attend the Bermuda conference at the last minute, and that as a result of the trip and all other foreign travel by Citizens executives that cost a total of \$48,000, savings to Florida taxpayers totaled \$233 million.

"I know first hand that face-to face discussions with the individuals making the decision ... is absolutely essential," Gilway said. "You cannot do business internationally without traveling overseas."

Gilway said the Post made a public records request for hundreds of expense account transactions and "this was the only error they found."

"Welcome to government," Scott replied. "Everybody, they're going to watch you. When there's an example like this, it makes it look like you're not watching the dollars ... It makes it easy for you guys to get attacked."

Scott, who is seeking re-election in November, assured Gilway that he's doing a good job, but that Florida homeowners irate over their property insurance premiums are especially sensitive to accusations of lavish spending. "Every guy who travels, we get questioned," Scott told Gilway.

Chief Financial Officer Jeff Atwater, who appointed Gardner to Citizens' board, strongly defended Gardner's excursion and said that if Citizens had not taken full advantage of the savings available from overseas conferences, the insurer would have been subjected to intense criticism and "Monday morning quarterbacking."