Jefferson stars in punch lines; Big Easy indulges big laughs but not much outrage

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By Christina Bellantoni

Rep. William J. Jefferson's constituents here think his ethical troubles are laughable and shake their heads when asked their opinions of the congressman.

The Louisiana Democrat is the subject of a widening bribery probe, and earlier this month, he was forced from his seat on the highly coveted House tax-writing panel.

Mr. Jefferson resisted repeated calls from Democratic leaders for him to step aside, saying his Hurricane Katrina-battered district needed his help to secure funds for rebuilding efforts.

In New Orleans, mentioning his name prompts residents to grin, laugh and usually make a reference to "cold cash."

Mr. Jefferson has not been charged with a crime and maintains that he is not guilty, but investigators revealed that soon after he was videotaped
accepting a $100,000 bribe, authorities found $90,000 in his freezer.

Sen. George Allen, a Virginia Republican who met with business leaders here to assess rebuilding efforts, said New Orleans "has been an important city since before Mr. Jefferson made by far the best real-estate deal ever," referring to Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase.

"First, I thought he was making a joke about our congressman," responded Mark Drennan of Greater New Orleans Inc.

Everyone in the room laughed.

Such exchanges are common in the French Quarter's shops and restaurants. Most of the people interviewed by The Washington Times didn't want to be quoted, saying the eight-term lawmaker hasn't been proven guilty, but they are happy to crack jokes at his expense.

The situation was no laughing matter for House Democrats, who realized that Mr. Jefferson's ethics scandal was hurting their quest to win back the majority in the fall. The caucus voted to strip him temporarily of his seat on the House Ways and Means Committee, and the full House approved the removal.
The corruption probe focuses on business deals that the lawmaker is suspected to have helped facilitate between U.S. companies and African officials in exchange for bribes. Two of Mr. Jefferson's associates have pleaded guilty to helping bribe the lawmaker.

The New Orleans Times-Picayune reported Thursday that a Maryland-based satellite radio firm serving Africa and Asia also is under scrutiny for ties to Mr. Jefferson. The report said the chief executive of Worldspace gave Mr. Jefferson a loan of between $50,000 and $100,000.

Seven other business deals are under review by the Justice Department, the newspaper reported.

Several New Orleanians sat reading the story over breakfast at the Clover Grill in the French Quarter on Thursday.

"Poor guy," one man said.

"He's a crook," another countered.

Court documents say Mr. Jefferson secured profits of a Nigerian company and set them up in his children's names.
During one meeting, an FBI informant said, Mr. Jefferson was asked how long he would remain in Congress.

"I'm gonna get your deal out of the way," Mr. Jefferson is said to have replied. "And I probably won't last long after that."

Mr. Jefferson said this month that forcing him off the Ways and Means Committee "unjustly punishes my constituents who, after Katrina, need my leadership on my committee more than ever."

He added that as a member of the panel he made sure that funds were available for recovery projects.

The Ways and Means panel recently held a hearing on whether senior citizens affected by the hurricane would get an extension on the prescription-drug benefit filing deadline. Mr. Jefferson led the charge, along with Democratic Sen. Mary L. Landrieu of Louisiana, to grant the extension.

Democratic leaders rejected Mr. Jefferson's request to be replaced on the panel with Democrat Charlie Melancon from his neighboring Louisiana district, saying New Orleans still would be taken care of without him on the panel.