

Atkinson resigns, pleads guilty to violations

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Reno Gazette Journal USA TODAY NETWORK

State Sen. Majority Leader Kelvin Atkinson, D-North Las Vegas, resigned Tuesday after saying he intends to plead guilty to federal campaign finance law violations.

Atkinson, who was serving his first year in the top legislative post, announced his departure in an emotional speech from the Senate floor.

He offered few details on an apparently ongoing investigation into his personal use of campaign funds. His attorney did not immediately return requests for comment.

“I’ve let myself and my family down,” Atkinson told his colleagues

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during a tearful farewell speech. “I accept full responsibility for my actions. I can’t express the depth of my remorse. I am truly sorry.

“I’ve been treated respectfully by prosecutors and investigators. I do hope to have the opportunity to prove one day this is not who I am. It’s just what I did wrong.”

Assistant Senate Majority Leader Nicole Cannizzaro, D-Las Vegas, will serve as his replacement. She was unanimously elected to the post within hours of Atkinson’s departure.

Atkinson was the state’s first openly gay Senate majority leader. Cannizzaro is the state’s first female Senate leader.

Assembly Speaker Jason Frierson, D-Las Vegas, expressed disappointment in a brief statement issued minutes before his longtime colleague stepped down. “I am unfamiliar with the details of his particular circumstances,” Frierson said. “While I’m disappointed by his actions, he appears to be taking full responsibility, as he should.

should uphold. By doing so, he betrayed the trust of the public, and therefore should be held accountable.”

State Senate Minority Leader James Settelmeyer, R-Minden, said the as-yet-unspecified charges against Atkinson had violated the integrity of elections and the trust of voters.

“We hope this is an exception, but we must get all of the facts and determine how far this corruption goes,” Settelmeyer said in a statement. “We must preserve the integrity of this institution.”

Assembly Minority Leader Jim Wheeler called his actions “more than troubling.”

Atkinson was first elected to the Nevada Assembly in 2002. He joined the Senate in 2012. He is a former management analyst for Clark County. Atkinson is also the owner of the Urban Lounge, a downtown Las Vegas bar.

Tuesday’s resignation marks the first time a lawmaker has left mid-session since 2013, when Assemblyman Steven Brooks was expelled from the statehouse amid ongoing mental health issues.

The Clark County Commission will appoint Atkinson’s replacement, who must be a Democrat and reside within Senate District 4.

“Our job is to focus on passing meaningful legislation that helps all Nevadans. We cannot be distracted from doing the work that voters elected us to do.”

The Nevada Senate Democratic Caucus said in a statement that it will continue to focus on fighting for hardworking Nevadans.

“The Nevada Senate Democrats are saddened and disappointed to learn of the circumstances leading to Senator Atkinson’s resignation today,” wrote Cheryl Bruce, the caucus’ executive director. “The charges levied against him are serious, and allege conduct that we strongly condemn. His resignation is appropriate. We trust the courts to do justice in this matter.

“Given what little information we currently have, we won’t be commenting on what appear to be ongoing investigations.”

Gov. Steve Sisolak said he looked forward to working with Cannizzaro.

“I am extremely disappointed in the news that Kelvin Atkinson misappropriated campaign funds for his personal use,” Sisolak said in a statement from a spokeswoman. “This admitted violation of the law goes against the integrity every elected officer in the state of Nevada



Sen. Kelvin Atkinson talks Thursday afternoon during the Senate session. Sen. Pete Goicoechea listens to Atkinson’s left. TIM DUNN/RGJ