

STATE LEGISLATOR

Pennington mum on European trip

State Rep. blames illness for missing special session, but travels to France where he says he had rehabilitation

By Don Jenkins
THE DAILY NEWS

State Rep. John Pennington said Thursday he will explain to constituents in a newsletter why he traveled to Europe after announcing in June he was too ill to attend a special session in Olympia.

But for now, he's keeping mum, saying he wants privacy while he battles ankylosing spondylitis, an incurable disease that causes pain and



John Pennington

stiffness in the spine and joints. "I just want to heal," said Pennington, R-Carrolls.

Suffering from a lack of sleep and weight loss, a distraught Pennington, 34, said in early June that he would miss a special session on the state's operating and transportation budgets.

At the time, Pennington said he planned to visit his mother in Tennessee, but said he was unsure whether he and wife Valerie would keep plans to travel overseas to cele-

brate their 10th wedding anniversary. The Penningtons planned the trip months before the special session was called, he said.

In a recent interview with The Columbian in Vancouver, Pennington acknowledged that he did travel "abroad," but he declined to discuss the trip.

On Thursday, he told The Daily News that he went through rehabilitation at an "Olympic training facility" in France, but he wouldn't elaborate or talk about where else he went.

Pennington, the Republican co-speaker pro tem, described the timing of the trip as "awkward" and

blamed questions about it on political enemies.

Relying on a cane to walk, Pennington has returned to some legislative duties, issuing statements about the Legislature's failure to agree on a transportation funding plan.

Cowlitz County Democratic Central Committee chairman Dan Buell said Thursday he had heard rumors about Pennington's European trip.

"I got two phone calls last night, and people were hot about it," he said. "I think he should have been there (in Olympia) because he's in a leadership position."

Cowlitz County Republican Central Committee chairman Bill Schumacher said it would be a "pretty far stretch" to think Pennington used his disease as an excuse to vacation in Europe. "People are suspicious of everything," he said. "He's obviously not well."

Besides, Schumacher said, Pennington shouldn't have had to cancel his plans because of the Legislature's marathon sessions, which Schumacher blamed on Democratic Gov. Gary Locke.

"The session was suppose to be over, and it's not his fault that the governor doesn't have his act together," Schumacher said.

