

Fleet to meet today with borrowers

[City Edition]

Boston Globe (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Boston, Mass.

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Date: Dec 15, 1992

Start Page: 52

Section: ECONOMY

Document Text

A meeting scheduled today of representatives of Fleet Financial Group Inc., the Georgia attorney general, borrowers suing Fleet and community activists is unlikely to yield a quick settlement of borrowers' claims against Fleet.

Aides to Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy 2d, who organized the session at the Bank of Boston, sought yesterday to downplay the possibility that it would resolve borrowers' charges of lending abuses by Fleet, New England's largest banking corporation, and its Georgia second-mortgage subsidiary, Fleet Finance Inc.

"This is not a brokering mission," a Kennedy aide said after a warm-up discussion yesterday among the Massachusetts Democrat and J. Terrence Murray, chairman of Providence-based Fleet and John Hamill, president of Fleet Bank of Massachusetts. "This is a fact-finding effort by Congressman Kennedy to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of Fleet, the lawyers and the community groups."

Kennedy also met separately Friday with community activists.

Fleet spokesman Thomas Lavelle said the company would have no comment about the meeting.

Kennedy, chairman of a subcommittee of the House Banking Committee, has not ruled out the possibility of holding hearings on Fleet's practices when Congress resumes next month.

Fleet Finance is the target of an investigation by the Georgia attorney general's office and lawsuits charging the company with violations of Georgia usury laws as well as antidiscrimination, fraud and loansharking statutes. Officials from Fleet maintain the company has done nothing illegal.

The meeting today is scheduled to include Kennedy; three Fleet officials -- Hamill, executive vice president James P. Murphy and general counsel William C. Mutterperl -- assistant Georgia attorney general Beverly Martin; Georgia plaintiffs' attorneys John Long, Howard Rothbloom and William Brennan; and Bruce Marks, a community activist and Fleet critic who is director of the Union Neighborhood Assistance Corp. in Boston.

Georgia Attorney General Michael Bowers, who has initiated an investigation of Fleet Finance's practices, said he sent Martin to the meeting as a courtesy to Kennedy.

"We're not going to resolve this from our perspective until we know what we've got. And we've got to get a lot of data first," Bowers said in an interview. "When a congressman calls I thought it would be appropriate to respond. Nothing's going to be lost by our attending."

Long, who represents Fleet Finance borrowers in a racial discrimination case, was even more

skeptical.

"I think this is a ploy by Fleet. Fleet has never been willing to do what it has to do," Long said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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