

Councilman calls for state investigation of Dutchess campaign mailers



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(Photo: Journal file photo)

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A City of Poughkeepsie councilman has asked the state Board of Elections to investigate Dutchess County Legislature campaign mailers, allegedly paid for by a committee that doesn't exist.

In August, "several Dutchess County Democratic Party members received enclosed mailers attacking Kari Rieser, who is running in the Democratic primary for the 9th County Legislative District" against incumbent Gwen Johnson, said Councilman Tracy Hermann, in his letter to the state.

Johnson and Rieser will face off for the Democratic nomination for the 9th District in Thursday's primary election.

"While the mailers claimed to be paid for by a group named 'True Blue Democrats for a Better Poughkeepsie', no such group actually exists," Hermann said in his letter. "It is the

party's belief, based on past behavior, that this campaign flyer was actually paid for by her opponent's campaign, Friends to Elect Gwen Johnson, which has the means, motive and opportunity to engage in such efforts."

Johnson, whose husband Randy Johnson is running for city mayor, said she doesn't "know anything about" the so-called True Blue Democrats group and that she had nothing to do with the mailer.

"I also get a lot of hate mail," Gwen Johnson said. "Whatever their concern is about her (Rieser), the stuff sent about me is about 50 times worse...because I am the elected official."

When asked if she denounces the mailer about Rieser, Gwen Johnson said she "didn't even look at it." But "if they slander my name, I'm going to sue them... accusing me of something I didn't do. I'm tired of them constantly harassing me."

Rieser said she doesn't know if the mailer came from Gwen Johnson's camp, but she's confident that "if there is any connection," the Board of Elections will find out.

Hermann, who represents the city's 8th Ward, sent his complaint on Tuesday, according to documents he shared with the Poughkeepsie Journal.

The mailer, which attacks Rieser, along with Democrats Rep. Sean Maloney and former state Sen. Terry Gipson, "is a ransom note-style flyer sent to Democrats in District 9, complete with a doctored picture of Rieser, followed by a bizarre list of baseless accusations, punctuation errors and out-of-context quotes," Hermann wrote. "In this case, money has been spent but with no reporting on its source and an openly fraudulent effort to place responsibility on a nonexistent and untraceable political entity."

Risa Sugarman, chief enforcement counsel for the state Board of Elections Division of Election Law Enforcement, said the office can't comment on whether "we open or initiate investigations."

Sugarman did confirm that her office received Hermann's complaint.

Douglas Goglia, associate counsel for the division, sent Hermann a number of questions Friday, according to an email Hermann shared with the Journal.

"How was this distributed?" Goglia wanted to know. "Were these passed by hand, or mailed? If mailed, do you have copies of the postage stamps or bulk mailing permit insignia? As it is, it is going to be next to impossible to determine who might have prepared these. It looks to have been done on a personal computer."

Hermann told the Journal he requested an investigation because he's "concerned about the way we conduct ourselves in our elections," as the city's Common Council Democratic Majority Leader.

"I feel there are two issues," Hermann added. One is "promoting a committee that's non-existent — and by doing so circumventing campaign finance law."

The other issue is the content of the mailer, which accuses Rieser of racism.

"In a city with such racial discord at times...it's abundantly irresponsible" to make such accusations, Hermann said.

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