

Watchdog group asks governor to replace Begin

Operation Clean Government also files complaints with the Board of Elections against two advocacy groups.

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PROVIDENCE -- Watchdog group Operation Clean Government yesterday called on Governor Carcieri to replace Board of Elections Chairman Roger N. Begin, saying that the board has failed to enforce campaign finance laws.

To back up its claims, Operation Clean Government yesterday filed two lengthy complaints with the board outlining 21 alleged violations by two groups advocating for and against ballot questions in the fall.

Operation Clean Government's chairman, Robert Arruda, said the complaints contain examples of "a cavalier attitude toward the board's enforcement powers."

"Because the Board of Elections has been so lax under Roger Begin, apparently these groups think they can get away with virtually anything," Arruda said. "The public unfortunately is not getting the transparency they need."

Begin yesterday would not comment on the complaints, citing a state law requiring all board investigations to be confidential until a disciplinary action is taken.

However, in November the board's supervising accountant, Richard Thornton, said the board was reviewing the paperwork of several groups including the two named yesterday in the Operation Clean Government complaints: Citizens for Representative Government and the RIghtNow! Coalition for Reform.

The board was also trying at that time to clarify the rules for when a coalition can file individually instead of as a political action committee. The distinction is key because PACs have to disclose all sources of income, all expenditures and can only spend \$25,000 on the campaign. Individuals don't have to disclose their sources of income and have no spending cap.

The distinction is key in Operation Clean Government's complaints and could be very important, Arruda said, if a casino question ever gets on the ballot.

Begin, a former state legislator, treasurer and lieutenant governor, was appointed to a 14-year term by former Gov. Bruce Sundlun. In November, his own board had a 4-2 vote of no confidence in him. Begin, however, said he had no intention of leaving his post before his term ends in 2007. Yesterday he repeated that stand.

Arruda says the law gives the governor the power to appoint the chairman, but is silent on removing him.

"There may not be precedent for this . . . but it does not state that he cannot remove him," Arruda said. "He certainly has the appointing power and we're saying appoint somebody else."

Carcieri spokesman Jeff Neal said the governor acknowledges "that there are a number of issues at the Board of Elections" and "shares some of the concerns that have been expressed about" its operation.

"He recognizes that he may have a role in this case," Neal said, but hasn't reviewed information provided by Arruda yet.

Arruda says his group has been working since 1996 to reform the rules related to spending on ballot questions and that Begin has been unresponsive.

Begin says the board is actively reviewing the rules with the help of several advocacy groups. While he says that Operation Clean Government members may have been at meetings related to the rules, he can't "remember them as a clear voice."

Begin said that during his tenure the board has worked with the legislature to strengthen campaign finance laws. There are dozens of times, he said, where the board has taken public officials to court for violating the law.

In its complaints, Operation Clean Government alleges that the RIGhtNOW! Coalition, a group in support of the separation of powers constitutional amendment, did not properly account for its expenditures. The complaint says several groups were obviously working together as part of the coalition, but many filings for expenses were made as individuals. Those filings included a statement that the person signing it was not "acting in concert with any other person or group. . ."

The complaint also says that the coalition filed a notice of organization on Oct. 25, but at least 10 days earlier had solicited funds from its members.

Operation Clean Government was part of the coalition but dropped out, Arruda said, because of the campaign finance problems.

The other complaint says that members of Citizens for Representative Government failed to report various expenses such as printing and postage for a mailing and that money given to the group helped put one of its members over the donation cap required of political action committees.

Operation Clean Government was in support of a Constitutional Convention -- ballot question 2 -- while Citizens for Representative Government fought successfully against the convention.

H. Philip West, executive director of Common Cause of Rhode Island, was a member of both groups.

"It's not surprising that they would go after the people who took the other side on question 2," West said yesterday.

West said "it's curious" that Operation Clean Government did not file complaints against any of the proponents or opponents of any of the other ballot questions, which just "leads to questions about their motives."

"There was a vigorous attempt," West said, "to comply with a section of law that's in a very muddled state right now."

State law requires the Board of Elections to take action "whenever possible" on a complaint within five business days of its receipt.