



Sarasota GOP, Martin Hyde fined for election law violations

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Probable cause found to proceed with two other complaints against political committees, but just one will move forward.

A series of complaints alleging election law violations by former Sarasota City Commission candidate Martin Hyde, the Sarasota GOP and two political committees associated with Sarasota County School Board member Eric Robinson resulted in two settlement agreements Tuesday and findings of probable cause to proceed with the two other cases.

But while the Florida Elections Commission determined there is probable cause to believe that both of the committees associated with Robinson violated election law, only one of the cases will advance because one of the political committees was dissolved.

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City elections are nonpartisan and candidates are prohibited from advertising their party affiliations.

The complaints alleged that Hyde, the Sarasota GOP and the committees chaired by Robinson schemed to get around the prohibition on partisan campaigning by moving money from Hyde to a political committee and ultimately to the party, which paid for a mailer saying the party backed Hyde in the 2017 election.

The consent orders approved Tuesday by the FEC require Hyde to pay \$1,500 and the Sarasota GOP to pay \$2,000 to settle the complaints brought against

them.

Meanwhile, the FEC will move forward with a complaint brought against the Making a Better Tomorrow PAC chaired by Robinson after finding probable cause Tuesday of an election law violation.

The FEC also found probable cause that another committee chaired by Robinson, Legal Reform Now, violated election law. But that committee has been shut down.

Ron Meyer, the Tallahassee attorney representing Michael Belval, a Sarasota resident who filed the complaints, said the FEC decided there was no public interest that would be served from pursuing the case against Legal Reform Now because no penalty can be exacted from a defunct committee.

"So they found probable cause, and then they dismissed the case for that reason, and that was solely the reason that was stated in the record," Meyer said.

The FEC rulings "showed that playing games like were played in this case don't serve the public good," Meyer added.

Yet even as Hyde and the Sarasota GOP agreed to settle their cases, Robinson insists the committees he chairs did nothing wrong. He said he plans to keep fighting to get the case against Making a Better Tomorrow dismissed.

The complaints against the committees are "frivolous and without merit," Robinson said.

Hyde gave \$4,000 to Making a Better Tomorrow on Feb. 13, 2017. That same day Legal Reform Now gave \$4,000 to the Republican Party of Sarasota County.

In addition to being the chairman and treasurer of Making a Better Tomorrow and Legal Reform Now, Robinson is the Sarasota GOP's accountant and past chair.

On March 22, 2017, the Sarasota GOP gave Andrick & Associates in Sarasota two checks totaling \$4,302.26 for "mailers," according to campaign finance reports.

Hyde said in an interview with radio host Cathy Antunes that he gave the \$4,000 to Making a Better Tomorrow to pay for the Sarasota GOP mailer.

"That \$4,000 went to a mailer that was sent from the GOP supporting me," Hyde said during the interview, which was conducted during the campaign and is posted on YouTube.

Antunes then asked Hyde why he didn't use his own campaign account to pay for the mailer.

"It's a nonpartisan race," Hyde said. "As it relates to coming from my campaign, my campaign can't directly send something out notifying ... me as a Republican, so it was suggested that Republican Party didn't have the resources to fund a city mailer, so I sent the money to a PAC and it came from there, simple as that."

"It was a mechanism to get money to the GOP," Hyde added.

Hyde later told the Herald-Tribune that he did not know he was breaking the law and received bad advice from Jack Brill, the acting chair of the Sarasota GOP.

"There was no malice or intent," Hyde said Tuesday. "It was a mistake, and I accept responsibility."

The Sarasota GOP issued a statement Tuesday attributed to the party's executive committee. It blamed the more serious legal violation mentioned in the consent order on a "contract worker who was running the day-to-day operations at the time" and is no longer employed by the party.

Robinson said he never spoke to Hyde or Brill about the contribution to Making a Better Tomorrow and that the PAC was not part of any scheme to funnel money to the Sarasota GOP.

"Nobody directed me to take that donation and move it to the Republican Party," Robinson said. "Not only did nobody ever tell me to do that, that never happened. That money he donated never, ever made its way to the Republican Party."

The next step in the case against Making a Better Tomorrow is another hearing, either before the FEC or the state Division of Administrative Hearings, to make a final determination on whether the PAC violated the law.

"I'm appealing it," Robinson said. "I didn't know anything about anything."

Meyer said the settlements and findings of probable cause show that Florida's campaign finance laws are too loose.

"Perhaps tightening up some of the laws that permit this type of chicanery to take place would be a positive thing to do," he said.

Critics say it is too easy to shift money between political committees to obscure the true source of funding for political ads. Such actions often go unpunished. This case was different because Hyde admitted what he did, Meyer said.

"I don't think there would have been a case if Martin Hyde hadn't said anything ... What made this case unusual was Mr. Hyde provided a roadmap of how it all occurred," Meyer said.