

From: Leonard B. Katzman  
Date: Sun, Sep 18, 2016 at 2:14 PM  
Subject: RESPONSE: Candidate forum by Portsmouth Concerned Citizens  
To: Larry Fitzmorris  
Cc: Derek Gomes, Newport Daily News editor, Joe Baker, Jim McGaw, Bruce Burdett, Scott MacKay, Ian Donnis, Ted Nesi , WJAR, WLNE, Bob Plain, Steve Ahlquist

Dear Mr. Fitzmorris:

Thank you for the invitations from the Portsmouth Concerned Citizens ("PCC") to participate in your candidate forums (attached for reference). I'm writing as chair of the Portsmouth Democratic Town Committee to respectfully express our concerns with the proposed arrangement and to recommend modifications to resolve the issues of concern and thereby to better serve all voters in our town.

Though members of the Democratic Party have questioned, yet still participated in the PCC's forums in the past, this year is different. The candidates have strong reservations about the fairness, propriety, and legitimacy of the forum because you, as President of the PCC, are a candidate for Town Council, as are current and former members of the PCC Board of Directors Deborah Cardoza and Paul Kesson.

With your corporation's officers as candidates, your organization will frame the initial round of questions, select from among any public questions submitted, and moderate the event itself. The appearance of impropriety and bias is simply too great. It would be a disservice to the citizens of Portsmouth for our candidates to participate under these circumstances.

As someone who has always stressed the need for transparency and ethical behavior in elected officials, you can surely see the issue with a nonprofit corporation hosting a candidate forum where their officers are candidates. The entanglement of a nonprofit corporation with an election -- the invitation you sent was on corporate letterhead and signed by you as president -- has given some of our candidates pause. And in the general assembly forums, you said in your correspondence that they are being conducted "in partnership" with the Center for Freedom and Prosperity, a Koch-backed state-level advocacy group that advances an agenda antithetical to Democratic Party principles.

The PCC's political positions related to local issues and endorsement of candidates have also contributed to our our candidates' concerns about their participation in this event.

As RI Ethics Commission attorney Jason Grammit often says when he does his yearly training session for local officials, there is a "gray zone" of questionable behavior that begins long before anything actually illegal or technically unethical takes place, and as public servants we are obligated to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. All of our candidates are firmly in agreement that the forum, as currently constituted, is in that gray zone and we cannot, in good conscience, participate.

As stated at the outset of this correspondence, our intent is to suggest how a neutral public forum might be held in a way that would resolve these issues.

We would be happy to work with you in your capacity as a candidate, along with the Portsmouth Republican Town Committee, to find an alternative sponsor and moderator to conduct candidate forums in Portsmouth. I'm confident there would be no shortage of volunteers that could host and moderate these candidate events such as any of the local and highly respected journalists or well respected journalism professionals in academia from the University of Rhode Island, Salve Regina, Roger Williams University, or one of Rhode Island's other well-known higher education institutions.

I have copied members of the local and state media who may be able to offer suggestions. I await your response.

Sincerely,

Len Katzman  
Chair, Portsmouth Democratic Town Committee

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