

A House Divided: Local GOP in bitter leadership dispute



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(Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS)

With little more than seven weeks left until Montana's primary election, the Cascade County Republican Party appears to be tearing itself apart from the inside out.

In the past three weeks, two Cascade County Republicans have filed complaints with the commissioner of political practices alleging either the Cascade County Republican Central Committee candidates or their primary election opponents have lied or falsified documents. A third Republican is suing the commissioner of political practices and the state attorney general, arguing that his right to forcefully criticize his opponent is being muzzled by state law.

The depth of the chasm separating the GOP candidates was spotlighted last week when the Great Falls Tribune obtained an audio recording of a CCRCC meeting held April 7. Comments made during that meeting have prompted allegations of hostility, bias and racism, and have led Republicans on both sides of the divide to question their opponents' conservative credentials.

Excerpts from the recording are in italics.

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George Paul, chairman of the Cascade County Republican Central Committee, leads a committee meeting in 2015. Seated next to him is Senate District 10 primary candidate, J.C. Kantorowicz. (Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS)

Discussion on the process of selecting local delegates to attend the State Convention:

J.C. Kantorowicz, primary candidate for Senate District 10: *"So does this mean I have to come back on the 21st to keep Roger Hagan and Steve Fitzpatrick from going?"*

George Paul, CCRCC chairman: *"Well, there's a good chance you're going to have to come back."*

Judy Tankink, CCRCC secretary: *"Unless you have a proxy. Would a proxy work in a situation like that?"*

Kantorowicz: "A bullet would."



J.C. Kantorowicz (Photo: Courtesy photo)

This exchange comes after several years of growing acrimony within the Cascade County Republican Party. The differences between Republicans have become so personal that some candidates are questioning their safety when attending CCRCC-hosted events.

In a series of emails leading up to a candidates forum in Vaughn on March 24, House Republican Steve Fitzpatrick questioned Paul about the security measures that had been arranged for the event. Fitzpatrick cited several confrontations between Republicans at prior CCRCC-sponsored events as evidence that his concerns should be taken seriously.

"It is my understanding Randy Pinocci and Jesse O'Hara were involved in two incidents at the State Fair in 2014 and that the July 2015 Pachyderm meeting following Wendy McKamey's House District 19 announcement became quite hostile and out of control as well," Fitzpatrick wrote. "It is my understanding one of the Pachyderm officers had to apologize the following week for the behavior of the crowd."



Wendy McKamey (Photo: Courtesy photo)

"I have never heard of something like that happening before," he continued. "Finally, I witnessed extremely poor behavior by members of the Central Committee at the Senate hearing for HB 454. At the hearing, Sheridan Buck was ejected from the podium during her testimony for repeatedly violating decorum and the rules of the meeting. Again, I have never seen anything like that in my three sessions at the Legislature."

Paul dismissed Fitzpatrick's concerns as being exaggerated and suggested the disdain some Republicans feel for him is based upon Fitzpatrick's voting record during the 2015 legislative session. Fitzpatrick gained statewide attention that year for his work on passage of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) Water Compact, but was censured by the CCRCC for sponsoring a

House bill supporting Montana's open primary election system.

"You alone defied the entire Republican Platform Convention by turning against them to undo their choice for closed primaries," Paul wrote to Fitzpatrick. "After not being elected as House speaker you stood against the Republican Leadership to show them that you were the one in charge. And after the Cascade Central Committee censured you for turning against the party platform and for behavior unbecoming a legislator, did you insist on meeting with them to show them how they were wrong? Of course you didn't. As always you defied them all. You set yourself apart. That must have taken tremendous courage on your part."

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The Cascade County Republican Central Committee is shown during a candidate forum on March 24. From left to right: House District 19 candidates Wendy McKamey and Randy Pinocci; Senate District 10 candidates Steve Fitzpatrick and J.C. Kantorowicz; Cascade County Republican Committee Chairman George Paul; House District 20 candidates Sheridan Buck and Fred Anderson; and House District 22 candidates Lola Galloway and Cleve Loney. (Photo: Tribune photo/David Murray)

Fitzpatrick responded, “You are taking a substantial risk by failing to take reasonable precautions to ensure the event is safe for those who wish to attend. If there is an incident, you, as the host, will be personally liable for failing to take appropriate precautions.”

Kantorowicz’s comment about “a bullet” being a means to prevent either Fitzpatrick or Hagan from being selected as delegates to the state convention came just two weeks later.

Kantorowicz told the Tribune his comment was made during a moment of frustration and was not meant to be taken seriously.

“We started the meeting at about 6 o’clock and it was a long meeting,” Kantorowicz said. “I hadn’t had any supper and I had worked hard all day. I was tired and getting really cranky because now I have to come to another meeting.



Rep. Steve Fitzpatrick, R-Great Falls, listens to the speaker of the House on the House floor during the 64th Legislature. (Photo: TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO)

“That’s where the comment came from. I won’t deny I made the comment ... but when you’re tired you’re not even thinking about something as illegal as taping meeting conversations without consent or knowledge.

“There absolutely was never any discussion at any time or any threat implied or implicit that anybody would be harmed – ever. If I make a remark because I’m tired as hell, I’m hungry, I want to go home and I sure as hell don’t want to come to the next meeting – it’s a flippant remark.”

Fitzpatrick and Hagan are less confident in their Republican opponent’s intentions.

“In this day and age, when a person suggests a political opponent should be murdered, you have to take those threats seriously,” Fitzpatrick said. “I regard the threat by Mr. Kantorowicz as serious and I believe Mr. Kantorowicz is dangerous and unstable. Roger Hagan and I have reported him to law enforcement.”

“For the chairman of a political party (Paul) to allow and condone such threats, from a duly elected official, within a formal political party meeting is unconscionable,” Roger Hagan added. “I take this threatening retort from Mr. Kantorowicz to be very serious. So serious that I have contacted the county attorney and will meet with the county sheriff. I felt this same fear during the takeover of my leadership of the CCRCC several months ago.”

Hagan was removed as chairman of the CCRCC in September 2014 by a vote of party precinct captains.



Roger Hagan (Photo: Larry Beckner)

"Myself, and nine of my CCRCC executive council members were removed from the CCRCC leadership because we 'weren't Republican enough,'" Hagan said. "We were removed by an angry mob who never addressed issues but spewed ideology."

A statement by party member Don Jacobs during the April 7 meeting prompted the most response from state Republican officials.

Discussion of the upcoming State Republican Convention on May 14:

Paul: *"I would think the RINOs (Republicans In Name Only) will really be strong."*

Bill Zuchonni, CCRCC board member: *"I know Conrad's going to have some people."*

Paul: *"Oh yeah – the typical bunch we can't stand will all be down there ... with their checkbooks, so proud of themselves."*

Jacobs: *"Send a couple Indians with headdresses on to kind of draw some attention."*

State Republican Party Chairman Jeff Essmann said he found Jacobs' remark "offensive" and made it clear that such statements do not represent the views of the Montana Republican Party.



Jeff Essmann (Photo: Courtesy photo)

"In our bylaws it is clear that the Montana Republican Party does not discriminate against any individual because of sex, race, creed, color or national origin," Essmann told the Tribune. "I worked hard when I was chairman of the legislative campaign committee to recruit and elect Native Americans in the state of Montana. We've done that and the LCC has continued to do that."

"I believe the Republican message of freedom and opportunity can lift every person in Montana up, and as long as I'm chairman I'm going to carry that message," he continued. "It offends me if people make remarks that may be construed otherwise."

Paul said Jacobs' comment was made in an off-the-cuff manner and was not intended to insult or belittle Native Americans or their culture.

"Don't think of it as a disparaging remark against Indians," Paul said. "It was a disparaging remark against the Democrats and how they conduct their business. No disrespect was intended. It had nothing to do with the Indians, it all has to do with the Democratic Party and how they've tried to buy the Native American vote for generations."

Fitzpatrick said it was not the first time an off-color remark about Native Americans has been made at CCRCC functions.

"The racist comments are in character with this group," Fitzpatrick said. "One of the primary reasons I do not attend Central Committee or Pachyderm functions is because of all of the racist talk I have heard at these functions. In May 2015, I attended a Pachyderm event and was absolutely disgusted by the vitriol and racist talk directed toward Native Americans and the members of the CSKT tribe."

Essmann said he has been aware that the CCRCC has been a hotbed of division within the Montana Republican Party for several years, and that he finds the bitter infighting among Republicans in Cascade County both frustrating and disappointing. But state party officials have little authority to intervene in county central committee affairs.

"Montana Republican Party bylaws don't provide me or our executive board or our state central committee with much power to deal with situations like these," Essmann said. "They're silent on dealing with conflict in central committees. That leaves me with the power of being a spokesman, which I tried to use when I visited with them (in 2015) and encouraged them to look at the bigger picture here."

"I said if you want to battle – battle, but take it behind closed doors. Obviously that request went in one ear and out the other. It's unfortunate they didn't heed my council."

Discussing a complaint filed by former Republican state legislator Jesse O'Hara, alleging the CCRCC does not support all of its GOP candidates:

Paul: *"He seems to be under an impression that he, or anyone, can dictate who we can support. The fact of the matter is that every central committee in the state of Montana has the right to support the candidates that they want to support and treat others differently. It's really simple, but again, O'Hara seems to miss the point."*

Paul: *"We're tired of the harassment, we're tired of the lies. So if O'Hara doesn't back off – if O'Hara continues to harass us in this manner – we're going to make a point of visiting O'Hara, Hagan, Fitzpatrick, McKamey, Buttrey at the very least, because we're done with it. We're done getting pushed around by these people and we're not going to put up with it anymore. There's nothing I personally hate more than a liar and we're just not going to put up with it anymore."*

Paul's statement about "visiting" people refers to two sitting state representatives, Fitzpatrick and Wendy McKamey; a sitting state senator, Ed Buttrey; the former chairman of the CCRCC, Roger Hagan; and former GOP lawmaker Jesse O'Hara.

Paul does not deny a climate of hostility exists among Cascade County Republicans, but attributes it to the actions of those legislators and candidates voicing opposition to the county leadership.

"To the degree there is a hostile environment, it has been created by people like Wendy McKamey, Steve Fitzpatrick and Roger Hagan," Paul said. "They do not come to our meetings, they do not participate in our events. Those individuals are the ones who vote against the party and rebuffed the leadership of the state Republican Party.

"They stand off at a distance, criticize us, call us names, berate us in the newspaper and try to convince the community that the Central Committee's not important," he added. "They're the ones creating the hostile environment. We've been the gentlemen in this."

"The accusation that I do not attend meetings or the events is false as I attend every meeting and event that I'm allowed," McKamey countered. "Hate speech has continually come from not only the chair of the Cascade County Republican Central Committee, but others in attendance as well. It is their behavior, not mine, that creates a hostile environment."

At the center of the dispute lies the question of who gets to decide what a "good Republican" is, and if it's appropriate for a party central committee to withhold support for a candidate based upon their perceived lack of Republican values.

"If the Central Committee is going to support all Republican candidates, as they reportedly have said they do, then they should not be picking sides in primary elections," McKamey added. "Voters should be allowed to formulate their own opinions and vote for the candidate they feel best represents their individual views and interests. They should be the ones to decide."

"We have a responsibility to deliver legitimate Republican representatives to the state Legislature," Paul said. "We understand there will be times when candidates do not always fall in line with everything in the party platform, but if you consistently don't follow the party platform and leadership and vote for the other party's initiatives, then you're not looking very good as a Republican.

"It's not at all about being smarter than the voters, it's about having more information based on fact. We do have more information, and we're certainly not going to be a vessel that will allow people to be duped."

"Who put George Paul, a die-hard Democrat for years, in charge of deciding which Republican candidate is the real Republican?" Hagan asked. "As chairman, I never excluded any primary candidate from inclusion. To exclude one Republican candidate over another during a primary election is hypocritical. How do you propose to represent all Republicans of Cascade County when the Central Committee picks and chooses?"

Essmann said he'd like to see Cascade County Republicans spend more time focusing on the task of defeating the Democrats in the fall.

"I'd be lying to you if I said I didn't feel like I ought to grab a couple people by the scruff of the neck on occasion," Essmann said, "but I've got to deal with the limitations of my bylaws – frustrating as they are. It may be something that the state party will want to address at some point, should this keep up."

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