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MiamiHerald.com

Key West News

Spehar: Complaint is no big deal

By Kyle Teal kteal@keynoter.com
Posted-Tuesday, June 17, 2008 6:36 PM EDT

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Elections panel to investigate Caruso complaint

Monroe County Commissioner Dixie Spehar is downplaying an investigation the Florida Elections Commission has launched against her, saying it's no big deal.

"I'm not really worried about it," said the eight-year county commissioner, who this week filed to run for another four-year term.

Geiger Key resident Paul Caruso filed a complaint against her June 3 alleging she's used her commission office on Whitehead Street in Key West as her campaign headquarters; that she used the office's phone number as her campaign contact number; that her assistant, a county employee, monitors Spehar's campaign phone calls during work hours; and that Spehar violated state law requiring every circulated and displayed political advertisement to disclose that it is an approved political advertisement (her campaign number was on the county Web site).

State statute says a candidate can't use his or her government office to further his or her candidacy in an election. Government staff also can't be used in campaigns during work hours.

In a letter dated June 12, Barbara Linthicum, executive director of the Florida Elections Commission in Tallahassee, said the commission has reviewed the complaint and found it "legally sufficient," meaning that it will be investigated.



"When it was brought to our attention it was corrected that day," Spehar said of her campaign listing her office number as her contact. She said she meant no malice but rather it was just a mistake.

"Spehar is an incumbent candidate and is a well-seasoned politician," Caruso wrote to the commission, "This is a blatant disregard" for state statute.

"I think it's going to catch up with her, using her county office as a campaign headquarters and her assistant as a campaign assistant," Caruso said.

Spehar said her assistant hasn't taken any calls about her campaign.

In a prior complaint against Spehar that Caruso filed with the state Commission on Ethics, he alleged she violated ethics law by voting for an ordinance that would have allowed redevelopment of the Stock Island waterfront. Caruso claimed Spehar had a conflict of interest because she lives on a houseboat there and could be influenced by developers.

The Commission on Ethics cleared her of the allegation June 6.

The primary is Aug. 26. The general election is Nov. 4.