

Elections Commission dismisses election bribery complaint against Holtz, Humphries

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The Elections Commission unanimously dismissed a complaint filed against John Humphries and Lowell Holtz, finding their talks that one could get a six-figure salary and a driver if the other won the state superintendent's race did not violate election bribery laws.

Scot Ross of liberal advocacy group One Wisconsin Now, which filed the complaint, still slammed the discussions.

"The inaction by the Wisconsin Elections Commission points to shortcomings in the law, not the lack of sleaze in the conduct of Lowell Holtz when he sat down and discussed an election bribe," Ross said.

In the days leading up to the February primary, Humphries accused Holtz of offering him a six-figure job at DPI if he dropped out of the primary and Holtz beat incumbent Tony Evers in the April general election. He also charged Holtz sought a similar deal if Humphries won the primary and then beat Evers.

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But Holtz countered the offer was a "rough draft" of ideas and that the deal wasn't aimed at getting one of them to drop out of the race. Rather, he said, the job offer was part of a possible deal to ensure the primary loser backed the other challenger in the general election.

The two said a December meeting at a Milton restaurant to discuss the proposal was set up by unnamed businessmen.

OWN then filed the complaint. But the Elections Commission dismissed it at Tuesday's meeting, according to a letter released Wednesday. The commission wrote in the letter the finding was unanimous that the allegations do not violate Wisconsin's election bribery law and "therefore there can be no reasonable suspicion that a violation of this law has occurred."

Holtz, the former superintendent of the Whitnall and Beloit school districts, told reporters the decision wasn't surprising, pointing to media reports citing former GAB Director Kevin Kennedy suggesting there likely weren't any violations of state law.

He also compared the talks to Hillary Clinton having talks before the presidential election on who would be on her staff.

"People do that all the time," Holtz said after a candidate forum with Evers.

In a statement the campaign released, Holtz also called on Evers "to reject the politics of personal destruction practiced by his hit squad at One Wisconsin Now." The group, he said, doesn't have "even a casual relationship with ethics, legality or the truth."

"Dr. Evers may claim to have nothing to do with this," Holtz said. "I for one don't believe him."

Ross said Holtz "wouldn't know ethics if it sat down with him at the Milton Family Restaurant."

"He should stop calling names and at long last apologize for his \$500,000 bribery scheme," he said.

Amanda Brink, an Evers spokeswoman, said Holtz "broke this news story on a live radio show when he discussed his backroom deal with unnamed business leaders to boost his salary and take over Wisconsin's 5 largest school districts."

Humphries, who is consulting for the Dodgeville district, wrote in an email, "I'm happy to be back in school helping kids, and glad that the elections board has dismissed this complaint. I was surprised by the original proposal from Holtz and the fact that the complaint was dismissed supports my decision to bring it to the public's attention."

Evers told reporters his major concern “wasn’t necessarily the bribery angle” but that a document Holtz brought to his meeting with Humphries included the possibility of taking over major urban school districts.

“That, to me, was the scariest part of the whole thing. ... What it was is backroom deals and that upset me tremendously,” Evers said.

Public policy, he added, isn’t handled on “the back of a bar napkin.”

See the letter:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/170315OWN.pdf>