

Ethics Commission alleges Trump joint fundraising committee, Brandtjen involved in campaign finance scheme to benefit Vos challenger

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The state Ethics Commission alleges Donald Trump's joint fundraising committee and GOP state Rep. Janel Brandtjen schemed to evade campaign finance limits as part of an effort that steered at least \$40,000 to the 2022 primary challenge of Speaker Robin Vos, according to records obtained by WisPolitics.

The commission this week recommended local district attorneys investigate and charge both, as well as the campaign of Adam Steen, who lost to Vos by 260 votes. The commission also referred for prosecution eight individuals and the three county Republican parties alleged to be involved.

The referrals accuse Steen, Brandtjen, the Save America Joint Fundraising Committee and others of committing felonies that carry the possibility of imprisonment and fines.

The records show the commission also looked into a \$4,000 donation MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell gave one of the county parties. But it decided there wasn't sufficient evidence to prove he actually intended the donation to benefit Steen's campaign.

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The recommendations for prosecution pose another potential legal headache for Trump, who clashed with Vos in 2022 after the longtime Assembly speaker refused

his calls to try to overturn Wisconsin's 2020 presidential election results. The Save America Joint Fundraising Committee is the primary fundraising vehicle for Trump's 2024 campaign and his leadership PAC. The referral doesn't identify any individuals associated with the committee the commission believes should face an investigation and charges. Instead, the commission found probable cause the committee and its "agents" had violated Wisconsin's campaign finance laws.

The commission alleges the participants sought to take advantage of Wisconsin laws that place no caps on the size of donations political parties may receive and allow them to make unlimited transfers to candidates.

The heart of the effort was an arrangement between Steen, the county parties and others to send donations to the Langlade County GOP, the investigation found. Steen and campaign aides told those who wanted to give more than the \$1,000 limit on individual donations for Assembly candidates to send the additional contributions to the Langlade County GOP with a "63" in the memo line. That references the district Vos, R-Rochester, represents. The number was a signal that the Langlade County GOP was to forward those funds or use them for in-kind donations to benefit Steen, according to the documents, which were obtained through an open records request.

Altogether, the investigators identified more than \$40,000 the Langlade County GOP contributed to Steen's campaign, which raised \$174,129 in 2022. A WisPolitics check of state campaign finance reports found the party gave Steen's campaign \$44,702 between July 7 and Nov. 8 that year.

The probe also singled out three \$5,000 donations that Save America made after the Aug. 9, 2022, primary to the Chippewa, Florence and Langlade Republican parties that came as Steen mounted a write-in campaign for the November election.

The complaint alleges the donations were made after discussions between Steen and those associated with the county parties. Steen, or others acting on his behalf, contacted the parties to confirm they would forward the money to the Langlade County GOP so that it could be used to support his campaign against Vos.

State law bars contributors directing a committee to use a donation to support or oppose another candidate.

The investigators concluded Save America directed the county parties to use the

money to benefit Steen's campaign, and they did so through direct contributions or disbursements to vendors.

The referral for Save America recommends the DAs in Florence, Chippewa and Langlade counties investigate and prosecute the committee and any other person the prosecutors deem appropriate.

When first contacted by the commission, the committee denied any wrongdoing.

Under state law, local prosecutors have 40 days to report back to the commission on any action they've taken. If the case isn't resolved within that window, the DAs have to file reports every 30 days until the case is finished. If no action is taken within 60 days, the commission has the option to refer the case to the state Department of Justice.

The commission made the referrals on Tuesday, one week after receiving a report from the firm it hired to look into the donations. That means the initial report will be due to the commission just before Wisconsin's April 2 presidential primary.

Investigators: Brandtjen 'complicit' in scheme

Brandtjen, R-Menomonee Falls, clashed with Vos during the 2021-22 session while she served as chair of the Campaigns and Elections Committee. She used the body to raise a series of conspiracy theories about Trump's loss to Joe Biden by 20,682 votes and backed Steen in his primary challenge of Vos. After Steen fell short in August, Brandtjen continued to support him in an unsuccessful write-in campaign that November.

Assembly Republicans then voted after the November 2022 election to bar Brandtjen from attending closed caucus because they no longer trusted her. A month later, Vos removed her as Campaigns and Elections chair, declaring she was unqualified for the job.

The referral paints Brandtjen as a central figure in the scheme, alleging she played a role in facilitating the contributions from Save America to the three county parties and spoke with Steen about the donations. The referral says there was at least one recorded conversation in which she discussed "getting" money from Save America to a county party. The referral says she donated \$3,000 to the Langlade County GOP, though a WisPolitics check of state campaign finance record didn't turn up a

personal contribution from the lawmaker to the party or a transfer from her legislative campaign account.

The referral accuses Brandtjen of committing a Class I felony, which carries a penalty of up to a \$1,000 fine, up to six months in jail or both.

Brandtjen today returned a call to a WisPolitics reporter while he was out of the office, but didn't leave a message. She didn't respond to a follow-up call or text.

According to the documents, the commission received the initial complaints in late 2022. The commission approved a probe Feb. 22, 2023, and hired an independent investigator, who isn't identified in the records.

An identical complaint was then filed against Steen in May 2023, a probe was approved and it was consolidated with the original investigation.

The documents don't identify who filed the complaints.

Docs: Florence County GOP treasurer asked, 'Did we just screw up really bad?'

According to the documents, investigators also found the Florence and Chippewa County Republican parties received contributions and forwarded them to the Langlade County GOP as part of the scheme. Investigators found the transactions were prearranged before the two parties received the money.

The referral for the Florence County GOP includes minutes from the Executive Committee meeting on Aug. 16, 2022. According to the documents, the chair announced the party would receive \$5,000 from Brandtjen and then forward it to the Langlade County GOP. The chair told investigators the plan was, "To help get rid of Vos actually."

During the Executive Committee meeting, the Florence County GOP treasurer said the donation sounded like money laundering and asked, "Did we just screw up really bad?"

See more on this story in today's REPORT.