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Voting machine controversy

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Columbus - The head of a company vying to sell voting machines in Ohio told Republicans in a recent fund-raising letter that he is "committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the president next year."

The Aug. 14 letter from Walden O'Dell, chief executive of Diebold Inc. - who has become active in the re-election effort of President Bush - prompted Democrats this week to question the propriety of allowing O'Dell's company to calculate votes in the 2004 presidential election.

O'Dell attended a strategy pow-wow with wealthy Bush benefactors - known as Rangers and Pioneers - at the president's Crawford, Texas, ranch earlier this month. The next week, he penned invitations to a \$1,000-a-plate fund-raiser to benefit the Ohio Republican Party's federal campaign fund - partially benefiting Bush - at his mansion in the Columbus suburb of Upper Arlington.

The letter went out the day before Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, also a Republican, was set to qualify Diebold as one of three firms eligible to sell upgraded electronic voting machines to Ohio counties in time for the 2004 election.

Blackwell's announcement is still in limbo because of a court challenge over the fairness of the selection process by a disqualified bidder, Sequoia Voting Systems.

In his invitation letter, O'Dell asked guests to consider donating or raising up to \$10,000 each for the federal account that the state GOP will use to help Bush and other federal candidates - money that legislative Democratic leaders charged could come back to benefit Blackwell.

They urged Blackwell to remove Diebold from the field of voting-machine companies eligible to sell to Ohio counties.

This is the second such request in as many months. State Sen. Jeff Jacobson, a Dayton-area Republican, asked Blackwell in July to disqualify Diebold after security concerns arose over its equipment.

"Ordinary Ohioans may infer that Blackwell's office is looking past Diebold's security issues because its CEO is seeking \$10,000 donations for Blackwell's party - donations that could be made with statewide elected officials right there in the same room," said Senate Democratic Leader Greg DiDonato.

Diebold spokeswoman Michelle Griggy said O'Dell - who was unavailable to comment personally - has held fund-raisers in his home for many causes, including the Columbus Zoo, Op era Columbus, Catholic Social Services and Ohio State University.

Ohio GOP spokesman Jason Mauk said the party approached O'Dell about hosting the event at his home, the historic Cotswold Manor, and not the other way around. Mauk said that under federal campaign finance rules, the party cannot use any money from its federal account for state- level candidates.

"To think that Diebold is somehow tainted because they have a couple folks on their board who support the president is just unfair," Mauk said.

Griggy said in an e-mail statement that Diebold could not comment on the political contributions of individual company employees.

Blackwell said Diebold is not the only company with political connections - noting that lobbyists for voting-machine makers read like a who's who of Columbus' powerful and politically connected.

"Let me put it to you this way: If there was one person uniquely involved in the political process, that might be troubling," he said. "But there's no one that hasn't used every legitimate avenue and bit of leverage that they could legally use to get their product looked at. Believe me, if there is a political lever to be pulled, all of them have pulled it."

Blackwell said he stands by the process used for selecting voting machine vendors as fair, thorough and impartial.

As of yesterday, however, that determination lay with Ohio Court of Claims Judge Fred Shoemaker.

He heard closing arguments yesterday over whether Sequoia was unfairly eliminated by Blackwell midway through the final phase of negotiations.

Shoemaker extended a temporary restraining order in the case for 14 days, but said he hopes to issue his opinion sooner than that.

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