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Richardson's Eligibility for Clean Election Funds in Question

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In the race for Governor, one Republican and two Democrats have so far qualified for public funding under the Clean Election Act. But a third Democrat, former Economic and Community Development Commissioner John Richardson, is running into some problems before the State Ethics Commission, which is still trying to assess whether some of Richardson's qualifying contributions pass muster.

Keith Shortall: I'm joined by State House Bureau Chief AJ Higgins. So AJ, is John Richardson's Clean Election bid in doubt and, if it is, what are the problems?

AJ Higgins: Well it's pretty clear that if the Ethics Commission had to decide today whether Richardson had met the threshold for CE funding - they would probably have to deny him. There are several hurdles that a CE gubernatorial candidate must clear. In addition to the 2,000 nominating signatures from enrolled voters, they must also raise \$40K in seed money and -perhaps the highest hurdle - they must obtain 3,250 individual \$5 qualifying contributions - and that's no easy task. Staff at the ethics commission are saying that they cannot discuss the details of the problems that are delaying Richardson's application for CE funding, but they did confirm that there were some signature problems with his contributions.

KS: But isn't there an April 8th deadline for the ethics commission to make that determination?

AJH: Yes, I asked about that and, apparently there is a deadline, but there is also some flexibility under the law to allow the ethics commission's staff to apply its own discretion into how any perceived irregularities should be handled. In Richardson's case he needs, 3,250, \$5 contributions with accompanying documentation that verifies that the contributor is a registered

voter and has authorized their contribution with a legal signature. Richardson's problems fall in at least one of those areas. The staff did confirm that some of his contribution documentation record did not carry the contributor's legal signature.

KS: So Richardson will have to come up with answers to issues raised by the ethics commission?

AJH: Yes, I think we have to presume that the ethics staff believes that if Richardson can resolve the number of questionable contributions in dispute to the commission's satisfaction by actually getting the signatures that should have been on the checks or documents, then he'll probably qualify. But that remains to be seen, since we don't really know how many such contributions that we're talking about. What do we know is that he doesn't have them at this moment and over the weekend, his people are going to try and locate their contributors so that they can affix a legal signature to their contributions. We could get to the bottom of this by the middle of next week at which time, Richardson could expect to receive a \$400,000 check to kick his primary campaign into gear.

KS: And how important is it for Richardson to win public funding?

AJH: I think its absolutely crucial at this point, with a primary 53 days away. If he had to suddenly run a privately funded campaign, it would be a major task. He'd also be a major disadvantage because his opponents have either already recieved funding and are underway, while he would have to spend much of his time fundraising. So if Richardson doesn't get this Clean Election money, he'd have to really think about where he's going to come up with money, or consider a suspension of his campaign.

AJ Higgins is MPBN's State House bureau chief.