

Mailers, signs, ads cause election strife

By Adam Wagner
StarNews Staff

BRUNSWICK COUNTY — An H2GO commissioner candidate is questioning whether a mailer sent to H2GO customers violated electioneering communications rules.

The mailer, which outlined the current board of commissioners' vetting of a proposed reverse osmosis plant, was inserted in customers' October bills. It included the names of each of the five members of the board of commissioners, including Jon Crowder and Poe Butler, who are running for re-election.

"It certainly sounds like what they did was without a doubt an electioneering communication," said Jeff Gerken, who, along with Trudy Trombley, is running a campaign opposed to the \$30 million project.

Gerken added that he's unsure he'll file a formal complaint with the N.C. Board of Elections, which would spur an investigation.

N.C. General Statute 163-278.6 defines an electioneering communication as something that is sent within 60 days of an election, refers to a clearly identified candidate by name and is sent to at least 2,500 households. A communication that doesn't mention an election, candidacy or voting and also doesn't take a position on the candidate's character or fitness for office is exempt from electioneering laws.

"It was an update of what's going on with the RO plant," Crowder said. "... I don't see it as a problem. It didn't say, 'Vote for me.'"

The mailer is the latest controversy in an election season that, in Brunswick County, has seen signs stolen

in Leland, ads bought without identifying who paid for them and a door hanger that did not identify its source.

Cecelia Herman, who is running for re-election in Calabash, is the only Brunswick candidate to be punished by the N.C. Board of Elections thus far. The punishment stems from her distributing of 100 door hangers and 100 post cards that didn't identify their source as being the Campaign to Elect Cecelia Herman.

"I never heard of a post card or a door knocker or a flier being considered print media, so I didn't put 'Paid for by the committee,' " Herman said Friday, adding that her total campaign expenditures total about \$209.

As restitution, Herman had to buy an ad in the Brunswick Beacon saying that she violated the code

and now understands the rules.

If she runs for election again, Herman said, she'll be sure to follow the rules. A second violation is a misdemeanor offense.

"I've learned my lesson," Herman said. "I'll wear my scarlet letter after election day, win or lose."

The Calabash door knockers are just the latest campaign literature that didn't identify their source. A small ad in the State Port Pilot's election section also caused a complaint.

The ad says: "A new mayor and two council members will be elected Nov. 3. The town and new mayor deserve new councilmen with fresh ideas, energy and the courage to make needed changes and improvements. The incumbents, Danny Kiser and Jeff Winecoff, along with Helen Cashwell are the reason we

are where we are today and have proven not to be the answer!"

It goes on to say that it has not been authorized by a candidate.

Last week, in Leland, campaign signs began disappearing, particularly in the area of N.C. 133.

Brenda Bozeman, running for re-election to mayor, believes candidates who oppose H2GO's proposed plant are seeing their signs disappear more often.

"It's kind of strange when a certain group's signs are taken and a certain group's stay there," Bozeman said.

Jane Crowder, who's running for re-election to town council, said it's not just one side's signs that are disappearing.

"Something's happening to everybody's signs, which I think is petty," Crowder said.

Crowder is reusing the

same signs she bought four years ago, but added she's unsure how many will be left when she heads out to pick them up next week.

This year's elections are particularly contentious in the northern end of the county, Bozeman added, because of the H2GO matter.

Leland supported a state bill that would have allowed counties to approve referendums on sanitary districts after Bozeman brought a petition signed by about 2,000 people to the town's board.

"I think it's caused tempers to go up on both sides, different people who are running," Bozeman said. "It's caused tempers to rise."

— Contact Adam Wagner at 910-343-2389 or via email at Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com.