

# Party infighting: Ohio Republicans sue GOP House speaker for control of campaign cash

**Haley BeMiller**

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A group of GOP lawmakers is suing House Speaker Jason Stephens over who has the keys to their campaign account, the latest escalation in an ongoing feud among Ohio House Republicans.

Reps. Derek Merrin, R-Monclova, Phil Plummer, R-Dayton, and Ron Ferguson, R-Wintersville, say Stephens doesn't have the authority to manage the campaign fund, according to the suit filed this week in Franklin County court. The complaint comes months after Stephens won the speakership with the help of 32 Democrats, even though Republicans initially agreed to elect Merrin to the post.

Since then, Merrin and his allies have refused to recognize the Kitts Hill Republican as the leader of the GOP caucus. And that's why they believe he shouldn't be managing the campaign cash as the 2024 election nears.

State statute doesn't specify who's in charge of the Ohio House Republican Alliance and says only that campaign funds "shall be administered and controlled in a manner designated by the caucus." Republicans who backed Merrin met in January and chose him and Plummer to oversee the account. Stephens' supporters didn't think the vote was official, but the speaker ultimately agreed to appoint Plummer and Rep. Jeff LaRe, R-Violet Township, as co-chairs.

The arrangement came with assurances that no funds would be spent or other decisions made without the support of both co-chairs, according to the complaint. But the lawsuit argues that Stephens and LaRe spent money, hired staff and spoke with candidates without Plummer's approval. The suit also names the campaign fund's treasurer, Matt Yuskewich, and contends Yuskewich hasn't recognized Merrin's or Plummer's authority.

"Absurd results would occur if the caucus, whether Democratic or Republican, are not allowed to determine the leadership of their own caucus," the complaint states.

The House GOP fund spent roughly \$284,000 in the first six months of the year and had a balance of nearly \$1.1 million in July, according to state campaign finance records. That money will prove critical for next year's

elections, particularly as supporters of Stephens face primary challenges in March from other Republicans.

Lisa Ferguson, an attorney for the three lawmakers, said in a statement that they won't discuss pending litigation. (Lisa Ferguson is also Ron Ferguson's mother.)