

Ohio Senate 2024: Bernie Moreno doesn't want Frank LaRose to touch his campaign paperwork

Haley BeMiller

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Cleveland businessman Bernie Moreno filed paperwork Wednesday to appear on the ballot for next year's Republican U.S. Senate primary.

There's one wrinkle: He doesn't want Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose anywhere near his campaign filings.

Moreno, LaRose and state Sen. Matt Dolan, R-Chagrin Falls, are vying for the chance to take on Democratic U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown in the high-stakes election that could determine control of the U.S. Senate. Moreno is the first candidate to file the required declaration of candidacy and signed petitions, which are due by Dec. 20 for the March 2024 primary.

LaRose's office works with local boards of elections to ensure the voter signatures on candidates' petitions are valid. In a letter, Moreno campaign manager David DiStefano said he expects LaRose and any secretary of state office staff who help his campaign to recuse themselves from the verification process.

"It is critical that Mr. LaRose recuse himself from this process so Ohio voters have confidence he has not, once again, used his official office for political gain by unfairly denying his political opponents access to the ballot or seeking retribution," DiStefano wrote.

A spokeswoman for LaRose's office said the assistant secretary of state oversees the filing process when there's a conflict of interest and will handle the Senate race submissions.

Still, DiStefano accused LaRose of issuing "warnings" to his political opponents. He specifically cited an unnamed source close to LaRose's campaign who told the Huffington Post that it would behoove former President Donald Trump to support the elections official in the race.

"If you are the president and you are fighting four legal battles, most of them centered around the validity of the election – and you're most likely going to be on the general election ballot in a state you cannot win the White House without – are you going to do anything to antagonize the guy counting the votes?" the person said, as reported by the Huffington Post.

LaRose campaign spokesman Ben Kindel declined to answer questions about whether office employees are helping the campaign, saying what people do with their personal time is private.

"The Ohio Secretary of State's office is staffed by the best professionals who have made our elections safe, secure and the envy of other states," Kindel said. "A political stunt like this is beyond desperate and shows why after millions of dollars spent this particular candidate remains in last place. Losers whine. Winners lead."

Feuding between Moreno, LaRose escalates

Speaking to reporters Wednesday, Moreno went a step further than the letter and said LaRose should resign from his job.

"We need an active, full-time, engaged secretary of state," Moreno said. "We need somebody who is doing the job every day that people elected him to do. I have no issue with him wanting to run for the United States Senate. I'm happy to draw my contrast on policies. But you can't do both."

The comments marked the latest escalation in tensions between Moreno and LaRose. Moreno questioned LaRose's campaign this summer in favor of the proposal to make it harder to amend the constitution, saying his opponent should focus on administering the special election. He then blamed LaRose after Ohio voters rejected the issue in August.

During a recent forum at the Greater Akron Chamber, Moreno took aim at LaRose's decision to move the secretary of state's office to a new building. The move will cost \$600,000 up front but save about \$11,000 in rent annually, NBC4 reported. The new location shares a building with the law firm that filed LaRose's Federal Election Commission paperwork.

"When you don't know how to negotiate and you're spending \$600,000 to move your office to save 11 grand a year, you're not somebody who's serious about cutting spending," Moreno said in Akron.

LaRose's campaign, for its part, has blasted Moreno's image as a political outsider. More recently, they criticized Moreno for saying Israel only needs limited support from the United States to "do what they need to do" in the war against Hamas.

"It's a clown show with these two," said Chris Maloney, a strategist for Dolan's campaign. "We're less than one week out from a consequential election in Ohio. Frank and Bernie need to read the room, stop attacking one another and instead join with fellow Republicans on advancing conservative values and candidates."

Kayla Bennett, a fellow in the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism's Statehouse News Bureau, contributed to this report.