

# House Republicans propose eliminating the state's campaign finance enforcer

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COLUMBUS, Ohio – State House Republicans want to eliminate a regulatory body that enforces deadlines and accuracy of candidates' campaign finance spending and fundraising reports.

While their proposed state budget doesn't repeal the [section](#) of state law that created the Ohio Elections Commission 30 years ago, it reduces its budget from about \$432,000 this year to \$0 in the next two fiscal years.

The scrapping of the commission came after two Republicans in particular – Rep. Jean Schmidt, of the Cincinnati area, and House Finance Chairman Brian Stewart, of Pickaway County – grilled its executive director Philip Richter at a budget hearing last month. The two lawmakers cited cases brought against them by a self-described watchdog from the Cincinnati area who files many election complaints against Republicans. After years of legal back and forth, the commission found no wrongdoing from Stewart and fined Schmidt \$50.

The Elections Commission's primary purpose is enforcing Ohio's campaign finance laws, including how candidates for public office report their spending and fundraising, and whether those reports are filed by legal deadlines.

But several House Republicans have aired grievances about the commission's sluggish pace for moving cases; its nonlawyer voting members who are regularly late or absent for evidentiary hearings; and a lot of hassle for cases yielding fines that cost slightly more than a parking ticket.

The commission's board is comprised of three Republicans and three Democrats all chosen by the governor, and one independent chosen by the six partisans. According to Richter, just two are attorneys. Richter is also a lawyer.

Stewart, a practicing attorney who as House Finance Chairman wields tremendous influence over the budget, said during a budget hearing last month that the Elections Commission regularly flouts the rules of evidence and civil procedure.

“Why not just send these cases to court where they can be dealt with by a judge who knows the law?” he asked.

Schmidt, who is not a lawyer, said during the hearing that it appears some members on the commission “may not understand the boundaries of the law” and “may not completely understand their role.”

## **OEC cases**

Chris Hicks, a self-described watchdog from the Cincinnati area who regularly files complaints at the commission, brought several cases involving ex-Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder’s preferred slate of candidates in 2020. In broad terms, Hicks accused them of benefitting from ads that Householder’s political team placed, and not reporting those ads on their financial statements. Those ads were paid for as Householder’s operation was accepting millions from FirstEnergy, money a jury would later decide -- and the company would admit -- was a quid pro quo bribe.

Householder is now serving a 20-year prison sentence for taking those bribes -- conduct unrelated to cases Hicks brought against Stewart and Schmidt.

Hicks filed one such [complaint](#) against Stewart in March 2022, which was dismissed given a lack of evidence that Stewart knew about the advertisement beforehand. That dismissal came in February 2025, after what Stewart described as an overly onerous few years of hearings and legal filings.

Hicks filed a similar [complaint](#) against Schmidt, which led to a \$50 fine.

Richter, in both addressing lawmakers in committee last month and in an interview Thursday, attributed the lag to a need to settle another case.

Hicks had also filed a similar elections complaint against Allen Freeman, a Householder-backed House candidate who was ordered to pay a \$50,000 fine after the commission deemed he “actively participated” in the production of ads he failed to report. Richter cited a need to settle the Freeman case, given that Freeman, Schmidt and Stewart were accused of similar violations.

“My case had nothing to do with the other [Freeman] case,” Schmidt said in committee.

State Rep. Chris Glassburn, a North Olmsted Democrat, during the hearing last month questioned whether Richter ought to be discussing specific cases outside the context of a commission hearing.

“I know that some of the representatives have specifically brought up their own cases, but I am uncomfortable and find it inappropriate for you to be proactively talking about individuals cases here,” he said.

In an interview Thursday, Stewart said the House is considering an amendment that would bring back something close to the Ohio Elections Commission but in a “quicker, streamlined, and less formal process.”

He said it’s unfair to force candidates to spend thousands of dollars on lawyers to appear before a panel that’s ill equipped for its job.

“They don’t know how to control a hearing like a judge would,” he said.

## **What the OEC says**

The Ohio Elections Commission is a fairly bare bones operation – it consists of Richter and two staffers, plus the seven board members. It was originally built to consider allegations of false statements made in campaign ads, but federal courts found this violated the First Amendment, which narrowed the scope of the office.

Richter, in an interview, insisted the commission provides value to the state. Something, or someone, needs to make sure candidates are filing honest and thorough campaign finance reports on time, he said. If reports are late or missing, candidates should be punished for those omissions to voters, he said.

He noted his office has fared well in the courts. The 10th District Court of Appeals upheld the \$50,000 fine issued in the Freeman case, and the Ohio Supreme Court [declined](#) to take the matter up. The same appellate court upheld another case in 2012 against the Geauga County Constitutional Council for failure to register as a PAC in 2012.

Richter warned that without the Elections Commission, courts will be flooded with politically charged lawsuits they’re not well equipped to handle. And the small-dollar nature of the cases could mean 88 county courts will follow 88 different legal standards.

And while the commission dishes out small fines, its decisions also can be devastating. Freeman was slapped with a \$50,000 fine. In 2023, the Elections

Commission [settled a case with former Republican gubernatorial candidate Joe Blystone](#) for \$180,000 and a five-year ban on running for office over campaign finance violations. Enforcement is sometimes uneven. In 2022, longshot Democratic Secretary of State candidate [Chelsea Clark was fined \\$500](#) for minor violations including having an improper name of her campaign committee.

“If the OEC isn’t here, who’s going to make those kinds of decisions?” Richter said.  
“If [campaign finance reports] are late, something should be done about that.”