

Maggie Valley municipal race sparks election complaints

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Two Maggie Valley candidates were the subject of a N.C. State Board of Elections inquiry for activities undertaken in the upcoming municipal election.

Both, however, seem to have gained little traction. An inquiry was made and dismissed regarding campaign literature distributed by Alderwoman Twinkle Patel that included an official town logo. Alderman candidate John Hinton was questioned about a letter he sent that included a \$1 bill and a note. While the investigation is not yet complete, a preliminary review appears to show little evidence of vote-buying.

Robbie Inman, Haywood County Board of Elections director, took both complaints and immediately forwarded them to the state election board for investigation. Patrick Gannon, the public relations director for the N.C. Board of Elections, provided the following information concerning the Patel inquiry. There is no election or campaign finance law that addresses the use of town logos and/or email addresses in political advertisements, Gannon's email stated. "There may be local rules or intellectual property restrictions that apply to the use of the town logo. It would be best for the individual to contact the town with those concerns," the communication states. This is the statement Gannon provided regarding the Hinton complaint: "State Board investigators continue to look into the matter. However, after a preliminary review, there doesn't appear to be sufficient evidence of a violation of vote buying. If any new allegations emerge, our agency would investigate as needed." In a Thursday email, Patel had this to say. "When I was told I could not use the logo early on, I stopped using the material. This was an honest mistake and when I knew it wasn't allowed, I immediately stopped distributing the material," she wrote. "This is the first I am hearing about a complaint and much different than vote buying."

Hinton said he sent out two campaign mailings, one to all voters in Maggie Valley and another to members from his church. In one letter to a friend, he included a hand-written note along with a \$1 bill, something he routinely does with his son as a standing joke. "I mailed 35 letters just like this one," he said of the mailing to some of his church friends. "He's the only one I sent \$1 to. We have a four- to five-year relationship and he had already told me I had his support." The handwritten note at the bottom of the letter stated: "Hey Mikey, I need your vote Buddy. If you need a ride, let Patricia or I know." Michael "Stony" Caldwell said he was surprised when he saw Hinton's letter that included the \$1 bill, but in no way thought of it as an attempt to buy his vote because before that, he'd told Hinton he would vote for him. "Getting \$1, that's a joke," Caldwell said. "Joe Biden's getting my vote, and he gave me \$1,400." Caldwell said he was not offended by the letter or \$1, but takes exception to others trying to use the issue to hurt his friend. "Somebody is pointing a finger at him just because they don't like his politics," Caldwell said. "I'm here for him." Patel sees it differently. "Whether it was \$1 or \$100, it is extremely illegal," she wrote. "I take my position as an Alderman very seriously and I am always ethical in my voting and my campaign. Campaigns are ran by donations by the people and they have a right to know about this vote buying and they have a right to be furious."