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# Rodriguez facing challenge in 26th

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By Angela Carter

The Hatch Act of 1939 aims to prevent elected officials from using public resources for political gain. At the state and local level, it applies to people who work in connection with programs financed in whole or in part by loans or grants from a federal agency.

The New Haven Citizens' Action Network has asked the U.S. Office of Special Counsel for an opinion on whether Westville Alderman Sergio Rodriguez, D-26, is in violation of the act because of his job.

Rodriguez is community services manager for the Housing Authority of New Haven's Monterey Place housing development in the Dixwell neighborhood and Quinnipiac Terrace in Fair Haven.

Monterey Place and Homes at Monterey is a mixed-income development that replaced the former Elm Haven high-rises with a blend of contemporary rental units and market-rate houses. The units were built using primarily \$45 million in U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development HOPE VI grants. Q-Terrace is being redeveloped with HOPE VI funds.

Alan Felder, a plumber for Yale University, is challenging Rodriguez in Tuesday's Democratic primary and was endorsed by the New Haven Citizens' Action Network.

Attorneys for the U.S. Office of Special Counsel declined to comment specifically on the inquiry and whether there would be a ruling by Tuesday, but Hatch Act unit attorney Erica Stern Hamrick notified the New Haven Citizens' Action Network in writing that the Office of Special Counsel had received the group's request "and will open an inquiry into this matter."

The Hatch Act prohibits affected employees from running for public office in a partisan election, using official authority or influence to interfere with or affect the results of an election or nomination, or directly or indirectly coercing contributions from subordinates in support of a political party or candidate.

In 2002, former Fair Haven Alderman Raul Avila challenged the late state Rep. John S. Martinez for his seat in the General Assembly and raised questions about the Hatch Act. Martinez was then head of Community Action Agency of Greater New Haven, which was receiving U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funds.

Martinez defeated Avila by a 2-1 margin in that primary but died soon after in a car accident. A finding in Avila's inquiry never was released.

Mona Berman, a member of the network's Steering Committee, said, "I think people are getting tired of the status quo." The grass-roots group closely monitored the budget process this year, submitted recommendations for spending cuts to the Board of Aldermen and most recently launched a Web site and endorsed 10 primary candidates.

Rodriguez said he is not paid with HOPE VI funds. His salary comes out of an endowment fund established by Boston developer B/CJ to provide resident services and pay for a resident services coordinator position, he said.

Felder, 44, built a house in the ward in December and is active in Man/Up, an organization that helps men get marketable job skills and find employment. "I'm having a blast," he said of his campaign.

He said city government must be more transparent by publicizing all budget line items and disclosing criteria for deciding which streets get paved and where sidewalks will be replaced. Voters, he said, are unhappy with revaluation combined with a tax rate increase.

"We need change in city government," Felder said.

Rodriguez, 57, was chairman of the board's Finance Committee this term. He said he wants to start reviewing the budget and setting spending priorities with community input, before springtime workshops and public hearings.

He said the Board of Aldermen passed a tax rate that was lower than the one proposed by the mayor, but for residents to see real relief, the state needs to reform the property tax system and area municipalities must share resources.

"All the responsibility doesn't fall on the aldermen," he said. "It's strangling all of us. Me, too."

He also wants the board to have representation in labor contract negotiations with city unions. "We get the contracts after they've been negotiated," he said.

Ward 26 voters will cast their ballots at Davis Street School, 35 Davis St.

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