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Ohio AG candidate says he offers alternative to Republican 'nightmare'

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BY JIM PHILLIPS

Athens NEWS Senior Writer

A former Cleveland law director who plans to run for Ohio attorney general in 2006 told Athens County Democrats Thursday that the term in office of current AG Jim Petro and his Republican Party cohorts has been akin to a surreal nightmare.

In a lively speech at the Athens County Democratic Fall Dinner, Subodh Chandra joked that, as a new father of triplet sons, he often suffers from sleep deprivation, a state in which sometimes "you're not quite sure what's real, or what's a dream, or what's a nightmare."

He went on to recount, tongue-in-cheek, a "bizarre dream" he recently had, and which, he suggested with a straight face, couldn't possibly have been real.

In this weird nocturnal fantasy, Chandra said, he dreamt that a "fat-cat contributor" to Ohio's reigning Republican Party had gotten a contract to invest millions of dollars, originally meant to provide benefits for injured workers in the state.

"He invested it where?" Chandra asked. "In rare coins, Beanie Babies and autographed baseballs."

Continuing with a story that showed remarkable similarities to the Thomas Noe scandal now rocking the Taft Administration, Chandra recounted that in his "dream," the state auditor -- a former Ohio attorney general -- audited the books of Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation repeatedly, but "failed to detect that there were hundreds of millions of dollars missing."

Even when the Securities and Exchange Commission wrote a letter to the attorney general -- a former state auditor -- warning about irregularities in the handling of the funds, he said, the AG "checks with his clients, writes a letter back, and says, 'No problem. Got it all under control.'"

To make matters worse, Chandra said, the AG, who's supposed to vet state contracts, never insisted on language requiring that any contractual disputes in the case be litigated in an Ohio court. Thus, he said, the state may end up trying to recover an estimated \$215 million loss in a courtroom "guess where? Bermuda!"

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As a capper to the tale, he noted that some rare coins and vintage wines purchased with state money were found in a cellar in Colorado.

Local authorities seized the coins, but left the wine in place, surrounded by police tape -- only to have burglars break in and steal it. Chandra ended by imagining the burglars, splashing fine wine into their glasses, hoisting them high, and "toasting the incompetence and corruptibility of Ohio's elected officials."

Finally dropping his narrative conceit, Chandra admitted that the story, though nearly incredible, actually took place in Ohio.

"I can't make this stuff up," he said.

A former federal prosecutor and Cleveland city law director, Chandra said that in the past, he had assumed that differences between him and the state's Republican officeholders were "mainly a matter of political philosophy and a matter of energy."

But the recent Statehouse scandals, he said, have shown him that "it's fundamentally more than that, my friends. They stole Ohio's future for half a generation... All of our collective, hard-earned resources were one big piggy bank for these people to rip off and give to their friends."

Chandra alleged that while perhaps not all GOP officials are corrupt, the current leadership is "part of a culture that they don't realize is wrong." As someone who teaches professional ethics to law students at Case Western Reserve, he said, he tells students that professional ethics isn't all that complicated -- you just don't do anything you wouldn't be willing to see on the front page of a newspaper.

"I'm talking about professionalism," he said, suggesting that it's simply a no-brainer that, if you go to lunch with someone who might have a reason to influence you, "you pay for your own lunch."

While working as Cleveland's law director, he said, he got plenty of offers of freebies, such as free tickets to sporting events, but "it never occurred to me to accept golf outings and hanging out in loges."

Likewise, Chandra argued, the Noe scandal could have been avoided if those in charge of the state had adhered to the most basic rules of ethics and common sense.

"We don't need a new rule that says, 'Don't invest state money in rare coins, Beanie Babies and autographed baseballs,'" he suggested wryly.

Chandra said that in addition to wanting to throw the rascals out, he wants to take the AG's office so he can begin to use it for the right reasons -- protecting Ohio citizens.

He noted, for example, that while he was in Cleveland, that city passed a law to protect its citizens from predatory mortgage lending, a problem from which Ohio suffers more than most states. Though the state had passed its own anti-predatory lending law, he said, "it was toothless, it was worthless, it was a piece of garbage."

Predictably, he said, Cleveland was sued by the credit industry in the form of the American Financial Services Association -- a suit

in which the Ohio Attorney General's office joined as an intervenor, according to Chandra on the side of the lenders. He argued that Ohio's AG should take as a model an aggressive state attorney like New York DA Elliot Spitzer, who has taken on Wall Street and other powerful interests on behalf of his state's citizens.

Chandra candidly addressed his Indian ethnicity as an electability factor, opening his remarks with a playful "interactive name pronunciation exercise" (first name rhymes with "abode," last name rhymes with "tundra"). For those who question whether a second-generation Indian-American can win state office in Ohio, he said, "I have a two-word response for you: Barack Obama." (U.S. Sen. Obama, an Illinois Democrat, is the son of a man from Kenya.)

Arguing that "America is finally ready to draw on all of the talents of all her sons and daughters," Chandra suggested that "maybe what Ohio needs now... is an Indian-American to go after the sacred cows of Ohio politics."