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Chandra: Attorney general should be people's lawyer

By John Boyce, News Staff Writer
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MOUNT VERNON — The attorney general is the people's lawyer, running the people's law firm.

Those were the words Subodh Chandra, 38, Cleveland, used in an interview Tuesday to define the job of the Ohio attorney general.

Chandra is running for the office against fellow Democrat Marc Dann, Youngstown, in the May 2 primary election. Chandra is running for elected office for the first time, while Dann is the state senator from Ohio's 32nd District.

"People have to just ask themselves one question when they are thinking about whom to vote for in this race," Chandra said. "If your own life, liberty or property were at stake, whom would you hire as your lawyer? Because the attorney general is your lawyer, [the individual] who is supposed to be fighting for you as the people's lawyer."

If they ask themselves that question, they have to look at just two things, according to Chandra — the candidate's qualifications (preparation for the job) and the candidate's background.

"As far as my qualifications, I'm a former federal prosecutor who cleaned up corruption and fraud in the health care industry, winning recognition from FBI director Robert Mueller," Chandra said. "I'm the former Cleveland law director who already ran a people's law firm once to much acclaim. I reformed that department, made it work, and battled predatory lenders and Jim Petro successfully when he was taking the side of the predatory lenders over our elderly and vulnerable. And, finally, as a father of triplets, I change so many diapers every day, how hard can cleaning up Ohio's government be?"

Chandra has just completed service as director of law of the city of Cleveland, a billion-dollar corporation. According to materials received from Keary McCarthy, his press secretary, Chandra led the work of an 82-lawyer department with both criminal and civil divisions. He also served as acting mayor in the mayor's absence. As Cleveland's general counsel, Chandra slashed spending costs on contracting outside counsel by nearly 90 percent, saving taxpayers millions of dollars. Under his leadership, Cleveland handled legal work in-house, and moved vigorously, through in-house investigations, to clean up corruption, including bribery schemes involving city inspectors and purchasing officials.



Subodh Chandra

"People need to look at the preparation for the job — executive leadership versus legislative experience," Chandra said. "I honor my primary [election] competitor for the work he's done in the legislature, but, regrettably, it has nothing to do with running a 350-person law firm and fighting for people against armies of lawyers for special interests. You better have a lawyer like a former federal prosecutor or complex civil litigation litigator who can take them on and who has run big teams of lawyers against those kind of people."

Chandra placed particular importance, too, on the issue of a candidate's background. He noted he has released his entire background — "thousands of documents on a CDROM" — to the media.

"I don't have to explain things the way that my primary [election] competitor does," Chandra said. "As a federal prosecutor, for example, I passed an FBI background check. Now my primary opponent, who has been reprimanded by the Ohio Supreme Court for inadequately preparing a case on behalf of a client, could never pass an FBI background check with that issue."

If he should be fortunate enough to win in the primary election against Dann and the Nov. 7 general election against Republican candidate Tim Grendell or Betty Montgomery, Chandra knows some of the first issues he would address.

He specifically cited joining the AGs of Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa and Illinois in their fight for greater oversight of natural gas market trading to eliminate market manipulation; joining the Connecticut Attorney General and the other attorneys general who have sued the federal government over the No Child Left Behind Act, saying it's an unfunded federal mandate; and holding the legislators and the governor accountable on the four rulings from the Ohio Supreme Court that say that the system of funding education in Ohio is unconstitutional. Environmental protection, wage enforcement and safety enforcement were other issues cited.

"Betty Montgomery and Jim Petro aided and abetted the legislature and the governor in blowing off their responsibilities to the rule of law," Chandra said. "I believe in the rule of law. When the federal government has walked away from so many of its responsibilities in protecting Ohioans, Ohio needs an Attorney General who is ready to face special interests and protect them from harm and from loss, instead of opening the door and holding the door open for the thieves."

Chandra stressed the importance of the background check.

"Democrats need to run a candidate that's pure as the driven snow to win back this office," Chandra said. "We mourn every time we lose. And we don't just mourn because we've put in a lot of hard work; we mourn for all of the people we were trying to help.

"We don't need to needlessly give the Republicans issues, because of our own misconduct or foibles, that then result in the people's law firm being in special interests' hands again; and that's why a background check is so important, along with qualifications, in determining whom people will hire as their lawyer.

"If my party values loyalty over competence and ethics, then it is lost. And I think most Democrats are not that extreme."

Originally from Oklahoma, Chandra is a graduate of the Yale Law School, where he was executive editor of the Yale Law & Policy Review. He also graduated with honors and distinction from Stanford University. Stanford awarded him the John Gardner Public Service Fellowship to work with Gov. Richard F. Celeste. He is married to Meena Morey Chandra, a civil rights attorney. They have 2-year-old triplet sons: Akaash, Chéthan and Karthik.

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