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Dann is attacked in debate

By STEPHEN ORAVECZ Tribune Chronicle

CLEVELAND — In a campaign that one candidate said has been mostly positive, a debate Monday between the two Democratic candidates for attorney general was dominated by accusations that state Sen. Marc Dann mishandled a second case for a client.

Dann said he is not embarrassed about the way his firm handled the case and accused his opponent, Subodh Chandra of Cleveland, of raising the issue out of desperation. He called Chandra's charges a "flat lie."

According to one poll, Dann led Chandra by more than 10 percent. Dann, of Liberty, and Chandra appeared at the Cleveland City Club forum.

On many issues, the two candidates agree. Both say they would be the people's attorney general and be more active protecting consumers against special interests. Both say they will work to make Ohio's school funding system constitutional and work to end corruption in Columbus.

From the beginning, the main difference between the two lawyers has been over experience. Chandra said that as a federal prosecutor and Cleveland law director, he has done the things an attorney general has done. That includes prosecuting health care fraud and corruption.

Dann said that he has represented the little person against big corporate interests. As a lawmaker, Dann said he has the political experience an attorney general needs to help set state policies.

The case in question involves Keith Phillips, who was arrested in December 2002 and again in April 2003 on charges of offering sexual favors to teenagers. He was convicted both times of misdemeanor importuning, a crime that the Ohio Supreme Court struck down in May 2002. Phillips sued Dann twice, in federal court in 2003 and in Trumbull County Common Pleas Court in March. The federal suit was dismissed and Dann had been dismissed as a defendant in the Trumbull suit.

Chandra defended his accusations in the Phillips case. When Dann talks about representing ordinary people as one of his qualifications for attorney general, Chandra said, it becomes a legitimate question to ask how well he has done.

First, Chandra said, the Ohio Supreme Court reprimanded Dann for mishandling a divorce case. In the Phillips case, he said Dann's firm should have had the convictions overturned. Chandra said Dann knows he cannot be taken seriously as a candidate if there is a second mistake.

Dann has repeatedly admitted the mistake in the divorce case. He said he has been open about the facts and has corrected the error. In the Phillips case, Dann said, "I have absolutely no embarrassment about this issue at all.

"The fact is what we were facing at the time is the fellow was charged with a felony, trying to expose himself sexually to a child. We dealt with only what he was charged with at the time. The case was reduced, he didn't go to the state prison. We did a good job for the guy," Dann said.

Even if his firm had gotten the first conviction overturned, Dann said, Phillips could have gone to prison on the second charge, which was a felony. Dann's firm got the felony "reduced to a misdemeanor. He was given time served and he moved on with his life, which is what was best for him. This is an absolute nothing case."

Chandra said the case is important because Republicans will use it to come after Dann in the fall, if he wins the primary. In contrast, Chandra said, he released the federal background check done when he became a federal prosecutor. As a result, Chandra said, he will not have to answer questions from Republicans trying to dig up dirt on him because everything about him has been made public.

Dann said Chandra is naive to believe that, adding there is plenty of material for GOP attack ads in the background check Chandra released.

One audience member asked the candidates if they were wasting resources in the primary that could be better

spent against Republicans in the fall campaign.

Dann said he agreed and with tongue in cheek, called on Chandra to drop out of the race now.

“Dream on,” Chandra said.

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Section: News Date Posted: 4/18/2006