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OPINION: Ethics issues likely affected Albuquerque city elections

By Mason Graham Common Cause New Mexico

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Voting stickers at a voting center located in a shopping center in northeast Albuquerque on Election Day.

Chancey Bush Journal

Restoring public trust in government and elected officials has been the major thrust of Common Cause since its founding in the 1970s, when Watergate and Vietnam led to widespread disbelief that presidents and top officials were telling the truth. Fast forward 50 years, and public trust has declined even further — despite the efforts of many reformers to tighten ethical standards, require transparent campaign reporting, and safeguard elections.

In the last weeks of the recent local election, ethics became a major issue, and it may have affected the outcome of several elections.

In City Council District 6, Abel Otero claimed his previous imprisonment and homelessness were “lived experience” that would make a difference on a city council that grapples with those issues. It was a compelling argument for many until he earnestly admitted — after the facts came to light — that he had lied about both. Otero withdrew from the race and publicly apologized to his supporters.

Nichole Rogers, the highest vote getter in District 6, admitted that she mishandled her charitable non-profit, which benefited from both private contributions and COVID relief money. The unregistered foundation disbanded in June 2021 but was still soliciting contributions in 2022. Rogers said this was not disqualifying. “I am a person who has had successes and has had failures. But I really believe in failing forward. When you know better, you do better — and I’m someone who can teach folks to watch out for these pitfalls.” Rogers will face Jeff Hoehn in a December run-off.

In District 4, an ethics complaint is pending against incumbent Councilor Brook Bassan who is alleged to have housed her West Side legislative assistant

at her home, where she registered to vote and contributed \$5 to help Bassan qualify for public financing. Bassan, who narrowly won the District 4 race, defended her action as helping a friend and said her assistant's re-registration and contribution was perfectly legitimate. Bassan also said she didn't mean to fudge her resume, which indicated she had a BA, which she doesn't.

In District 8, Idalia Lechuga-Tena faced old questions about votes she cast at age 20 before she was a legal citizen as well as her residency in the legislative district to which she was appointed by the County Commission in 2015. Idalia Lechuga-Tena, a Democrat, lost her race in the heavily Republican district.

APS School Board candidate in the South Valley, Robert T. Trujillo, who lost his race despite multiple endorsements, faced questions about his use of a gun in his domestic violence and battery charges, which were dismissed in 2006. More recently liens on his construction business and his tax problems — he owes \$200,000 in back taxes — came to light. In that case, Trujillo blamed his accountant.

Although these problems came to light late, we are fortunate that the media uncovered and verified some red flags — even if voters did not always act on them.

Everyone makes mistakes and deserves second chances. But voters deserve high ethical standards from those they trust to deal with public money, allocate scarce resources and assure public safety. If voters do not know the full story or chose to disregard it for other reasons, then there must be other safeguards to protect the public from unethical behavior, from both candidates and elected officials.

That's why we are big supporters of clear ethical codes and ethics commissions at both the local and state level to enforce them.

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