

Freeholder assailed over sister's contract

Scanlon denies Republican critics' allegations of ethical conflict

Thursday, November 02, 2006

BY JOE RYAN

Star-Ledger Staff

Freeholder Deborah Scanlon is under fire from local Republicans for not publicly disclosing that her sister was the sales representative for a \$1.9 million county contract awarded in 2004.

Scanlon, a Democrat up for reelection next week, did not vote on the resolution approving the no-bid contract to buy telephone equipment from the company where her sister, Diane Pabst, works.

Instead, the veteran freeholder left the dais shortly before the January 2004 vote, then returned after the all-Democratic board had unanimously passed the measure, according to meeting minutes.

State ethics law forbids legislators from voting on measures that steer business to immediate family members, and Republicans are not accusing Scanlon of breaking the law.

But by walking away without explanation, they said it appears she tried to hide her conflict of interest and gave the contract the whiff of a sweetheart arrangement.

"It smacks of an orchestrated deal," said Phil Morin, chair of the Union County Republican Committee.

Scanlon insists she did nothing wrong. The Union Township resident said she did not participate in negotiations with her sister's company, Consultedge, and said she did not lobby her colleagues to approve the deal.

"I'd love to be able to tell my sister that it was me that got her that contact, but that was not the case," Scanlon said.

Her running mate, freeholder chair Al Mirabella, accused Republicans of grasping for mud to throw days before the campaign.

"It's absurd," Mirabella said. "They can't talk about the issues, so they ... invent this impropriety, and I think it is despicable."

The county negotiated with one other company before hiring Consultedge to replace its telecommunications system. Both were approved state vendors, which generally offer lower prices and allowed the county to award the contract without soliciting other bids.

Consultedge landed the contract because they offered better services, county officials said. Pabst's role as sales representative was not a factor, said Sebastian D'Elia, county spokesman.

Scanlon did not reveal her sister's involvement, even to her fellow freeholders, because "she wanted the project to be voted upon for its own merits," D'Elia said.

"She didn't want that to influence the decision they made," he said.

County Manager George De vanney, however, was aware that Pabst and Scanlon were sisters, D'Elia said.

Scanlon's failure to publicly disclose her sister's role raises questions whether other relatives of freeholders have benefited from county contracts, said Patricia Quattrocchi, a Republican freeholder candidate.

"It does send up warning flags," Quattrocchi said.

While Scanlon did not break the law, Morin said the episode indicated that she and the other freeholders suffer from a lack of moral character.

"It is troubling that no one on the board turned to any one else and said, 'Maybe it's not appropriate to award a \$2 million contract to a freeholder's sister,'" he said.

Scanlon maintains she acted properly.

"I certainly believe everything was above board," she said.

Joe Ryan may be reached at jryan@starledger.com or (908) 302-1508.