

## **Election 2006 : Ethics focus may affect local races**

### ***With some area officials facing charges in an FBI bribery sting, some observers say voters could be more focused on a candidate's integrity.***

**By Michael Davis and Ian Berry Staff Writers**

With ethics a hot topic in federal and state government, the theme could emerge in some local races this year, political officials and observers said.

Jonathan Rummel, an East Ridge-based Republican political consultant, said the Chattanooga area's relatively high number of officials charged in the FBI's Tennessee Waltz sting operation makes the scandal more pertinent to voters here.

"It's something that people are going to think about in the Chattanooga area more than maybe perhaps in Knoxville, the Tri-cities or the Nashville area," he said.

The FBI investigation, in which nine people including eight former or current elected officials face federal corruption charges, will have some effect at the local level, Hamilton County Republican Party Chairman Bobby Wood said.

"I would hope that ethics aren't a major part of the campaigns, but I have a fear that it definitely will be," he said.

Stuart James, chairman of the county Democratic Party, said Mr. Wood is being disingenuous, "particularly when he has raised the issue by picketing the governor."

During Gov. Phil Bredesen's visit to Chattanooga earlier this month to promote ethics reform legislation, Mr. Wood was among those who picketed, telling the governor that his administration has its own ethics problems.

Mr. Wood also said that while Democrats may bring up ethics issues related to federal lobbyist Jack Abramoff, they would have to answer for Tennessee Waltz. Mr. Abramoff recently pleaded guilty to fraud, tax evasion and conspiracy to bribe public officials.

"They realize they've got to shift the focus away from home," Mr. Wood said.

Mr. James said the scandals involving Mr. Abramoff and Tennessee Waltz won't become specific issues in local races. However, increasing public distrust of elected officials will make ethics in general an issue for local candidates, he said.

"I think every county commission candidate running for office is thinking about ethics," Mr. James said.

Hamilton County Commission candidate Warren Mackey, who is challenging William Cotton for the Democratic nomination in District 4, said ethics and integrity are part of his campaign message. He said he wasn't making an issue of the extortion charges facing Mr. Cotton, who could not be reached for comment.

"I may allude to integrity, but I wouldn't say anything directly that would give rise to him," Dr. Mackey said.

University of Georgia political science professor Dr. Charles Bullock said ethics reform can divert attention from other issues.

However, local candidates still like to use the issue to their political advantage, Dr. Bullock said.

"Ethics is something that nobody's against, and it doesn't cost anything," he said.

E-mail Michael Davis at [michaeld@timesfreepress.com](mailto:michaeld@timesfreepress.com) E-mail Ian Berry at [iberry@timesfreepress.com](mailto:iberry@timesfreepress.com) TENNESSEE WALTZ Nine people, including eight current or former state lawmakers, have been charged in the FBI's Tennessee Waltz sting. The charges allege officials accepted bribes in exchange helping a fake company set up by the FBI.

*Former state Rep. Chris Newton, R-Cleveland \* State Sen. Kathryn Bowers, D-Memphis Former state Sen. John Ford, D-Memphis Former state Sen. Roscoe Dixon, D-Memphis State Sen. Ward Crutchfield, D-Chattanooga Former Hamilton County Board of Education member Charles Love\* Hamilton County Commissioner William Cotton Memphis political activist Barry Myers\* Shelby County Commissioner Michael Hooks Sr. \* Pledaded guilty*

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