

Marion GOP chair caught politicking at state job, fired

Chrissie Thompson, USA Today Network-Ohio 4:34 p.m. EDT September 9, 2016



(Photo: File photo)

COLUMBUS - John Matthews, chairman of the Marion County GOP, was fired from his job with the state late Thursday after a state watchdog found he made political phone calls while on the clock for his taxpayer-funded job.

According to an investigation by the Ohio inspector general's office, Matthews used work time to hold 541 phone calls and send 1,220 text messages to people involved in partisan politics from October 2015 to Jan. 22, 2016. Matthews served as the director of claims support for the Industrial Commission of Ohio, the appeals body for workers' compensation decisions in Ohio – a taxpayer-paid job that required him to refrain from politicking during work hours.

The ICO terminated Matthews Thursday after receiving a report of the investigation, spokesman Adam Gibbs said.

He also could face charges for using state-paid time to conduct personal and political business.

Reached by phone Friday, Matthews declined to comment.

The inspector general's office started investigating Matthews in January after receiving an anonymous tip that Matthews "spends his workday sleeping and fundraising for the Kasich campaign."

The office subpoenaed his personal cell phone records and found dozens of hours of calls and text messages to people ranging from local Republicans to a state senator to the All Occasions Banquet facility in Waldo, where the Marion GOP was planning to hold a fundraiser.

When investigators confronted Matthews with their findings, he said he had tried to place those calls on his lunch hour or outside of work hours, because he knew he wasn't supposed to handle political business at work. But the bulk of the calls and text messages fell outside of the times Matthews indicated he took lunch.

"Matthews expressed surprise over the amount of activity on his personal cell phone," according to the inspector general's report.

Prosecutors for the City of Columbus and Franklin County received a copy of the report and are reviewing related documents as they consider pursuing charges.

"Based on the summary IG report, there are violations of law that I expect to present to our grand jury," Ron O'Brien, the Franklin County prosecutor and an elected Republican, said in an email.

Along with chairing the Marion County Republican Party, Matthews, of Caledonia, served as a delegate to the Republican convention for Gov. John Kasich and holds a seat on the Ohio Republican Party's state central committee.

Ohio GOP spokeswoman Brittany Warner said, "We are aware of the report and will be reviewing it in its entirety, but if the findings are true, they're unfortunate and not defensible."

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