

Calif. candidate denies he sent letter to Hispanic immigrants

By Peter Prengaman, Associated Press | October 20, 2006

GARDEN GROVE, Calif. -- A Republican congressional candidate said yesterday that he was not personally involved in sending a letter informing Hispanic immigrants that they could go to jail or be deported if they vote next month, a mailing that prompted a state investigation.

"I did not do this. I did not approve of any letter," said Tan D. Nguyen, the GOP challenger to Democratic Representative Loretta Sanchez.

The investigation is focused on Nguyen's campaign, according to two law enforcement officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to publicly discuss it.

Nguyen, who has emphasized illegal immigration prevention during his campaign, said he believed an employee in his office might have used his voter database to send out the letter without his knowledge. He said that employee has been "discharged."

Immigrants who are naturalized US citizens can legally vote.

State and federal law prohibit threatening or intimidating voters. The state and federal investigations began after the complaints about the letters began surfacing this week.

"I will do whatever I can do to encourage all citizens in this district to vote," Nguyen said. He said he was cooperating with authorities and planned to continue his campaign.

The attorney general's office did not expect to announce developments or arrests in the case yesterday, spokesman Nathan Barankin said.

He said he did not know how long the investigation would take, but did say that investigators "have identified where we believe the mailing list was obtained."

Christopher West of Mailing Pros, based in Huntington Beach, said he didn't know any laws were being broken when his company sent the mailer.

"It was in Spanish," West said. "And I don't read Spanish."

He said he told investigators who hired him. He declined to name the person.

In an interview yesterday Sanchez said she had never spoken to Nguyen because her campaign didn't see him as a threat to her reelection.

She said that she didn't know who issued the letter, but that she would be especially troubled if it were Nguyen, who immigrated to the United States from Vietnam as a child.

Nguyen's campaign website says he opposes illegal immigration.

"If it is in fact this guy, the most disgusting and saddest thing about it is that it comes from another immigrant," Sanchez said. "These communities have spent years trying to get naturalized immigrants to vote."

Nguyen's campaign website says he was born in Vietnam in 1973.

In 2004, Nguyen unsuccessfully ran in the Democratic primary to challenge GOP Representative Dana Rohrabacher.

Scott Baugh, chairman of the Orange County Republican Party, condemned the letter as "an obnoxious, grotesque piece of work."

"Regardless of who did it -- Republican or Democrat -- if it's a crime, then whoever did it should be prosecuted," Baugh said.

The note's letterhead resembles that of California Coalition for Immigration Reform, a group that opposes illegal immigration, but group leader Barbara Coe said she told investigators for the attorney general's office Wednesday that her group did not authorize the letter and that she did not know who sent it.

"The letterhead was altered, and I've never heard of any Sergio Ramirez," the name signed to the letter, Coe said.■

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