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FEATURED

KCB commissioner's voter status cleared

By RICHARD TAMBORRINO Special to The Citizen
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Harding

The wide division that's existed in Key Colony Beach for months has filtered over recently to resident contentions that City Commissioner Tom Harding has been ineligible to vote in Monroe County and to subsequently serve as city commissioner because of that questioned voter status. It appears now those suspicions have been addressed.

Monroe County Supervisor of Elections Joyce Griffin has been fielding resident complaints while also advising Harding about his county voter status since last week. Key to the contentions was that Harding has been homesteaded in Michigan for the entire time he's been a KCB commissioner. Harding had not been homesteaded in Florida and, by law, a homeowner can't be homesteaded in two states.

Griffin was initially unsure how to handle Harding's situation, prompting her to send a letter to Monroe County State Attorney Dennis Ward for guidance. However, after researching the situation thoroughly, she determined he is eligible to vote in KCB and therefore to serve in office.

In a phone conversation, Griffin, who's planning to step down as the county's elections supervisor in January 2025, said she contacted the York Township, Michigan election office and found Harding had been removed from their voter rolls for several years and hadn't recently voted there either.

“Harding has always been a valid Florida resident. If you live here, you can vote here”, said Griffin, noting “his condo in KCB is listed under he and his wife’s names”, rendering his residency clear. She also said she felt compelled to contact the Monroe County State Attorney’s Office because he’s an elected official. “But I’m putting this to bed now,” she concluded.

Harding was reached by phone and confirmed that Griffin advised him to relinquish his Michigan homestead and register for a Monroe County one, which he applied for on June 13. He maintains he was not aware of the homestead situation and confirmed he has traditionally lived 50% in Michigan and 50% in KCB for the past 20 years, except until recently, when a family tragedy required more of his presence in Michigan.

“When there were two meetings a month, I attended all the commission meetings in person or via Zoom”, said Harding. “In my opinion, my performance since I was elected in 2020 has served the citizens of Key Colony Beach.”

He added that serving KCB is important to him, as evidenced by a pedestrian safety improvement project and a grant from the South Florida FDOT he’s seeking to improve the curve at the end of Sadowski Causeway. He also added he never sought a government position in Michigan after retiring from General Motors but wanted to contribute to KCB after his experience on the city’s utility board.

It also appears Harding is not guilty of breaking any law. An email from Jacob Karl in the York County Property Assessor’s office to Griffin said that “Michigan Principal Residence Exemption (PRE or Homestead) laws work similarly to Florida. The exemption has been applied at 9270 Yorkshire Drive since 1997 when Thomas L. Harding

and Mary E. Harding purchased their property in York Township. As long as the owners are not claiming a similar exemption in another location, they are not in violation of any Michigan Homestead Laws and may be registered to vote in Florida” read the email.

Griffin added that her assistance in helping Harding resolve this issue is “not precedent setting,” as she has done this before where she’s examined a voter’s residency and altered a person’s voting status.

Some residents were claiming that the commission should remove Harding and look at all his votes since he was elected and to also pay back any stipends and travel expenses incurred while in office.

Voter fraud is a hot topic for the governor’s office and one resident has apparently notified the governor of this situation. Griffin admitted her office mistakenly allowed Harding to vote in Monroe County initially because Harding was allowed to vote in a KCB election for the first time several years ago by showing his Michigan driver license as identification, and it was accepted. He added, however, when he voted for president in 2020, he had to use his passport as proof of identification as election officials wouldn’t then accept his driver’s license.

Ward confirmed via text message last week that “I see no reason why Mr. Harding cannot hold office.”

The KCB City Commission met on June 15 and there was no discussion surrounding these resident contentions, Harding’s status or his voting record while serving as commissioner.

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