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County GOP takes cautious stance

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HIGHLIGHT: POLITICS: Cross-dressing photos of a political candidate in Johnson County have caused concern in the county's Republican Party.

CLEBURNE--More than 100 people showed up at Johnson County Republican Party headquarters Tuesday night hoping to hear more about photos of state House candidate Sam Walls in women's attire that began circulating last week and have divided the county GOP.

Walls, 64, is in the April 13 GOP primary runoff against Burleson real estate broker Rob Orr for the House District 58 seat.

After hearing a brief statement from one of Walls' supporters, the party's roughly 20-member executive committee adjourned to a closed session while the crowd, dominated by Walls supporters, milled outside.

Two and a half hours later, party chairman Jeff Judd read a statement that left Walls' backers and his District 58 opponent Rob Orr each claiming victory in the dispute about the photos and how they were made public.

The statement called on all Republican party candidates to "keep the peoples' trust by living their lives and conducting their activities in a manner that is above reproach."

Judd said, "While the party is certainly saddened by the recent turn of events, we are hopeful that the persons involved are doing their best to address these issues."

The statement urged voters to turn out to show their support for "our conservative values and to vote their consciences."

Orr declared that the statement supported his candidacy.

"We are very pleased with the statement they came out with. That is the very reason we are running for office -- for our strong conservative values," he said. "I don't know what more they could have done. I think they sent a strong message that the Republican Party stands for strong family values."

Walls' campaign manager, Steven Schar, said the executive committee statement favored Walls.

"I'm glad the party came together as a whole to decide that Sam should stay in this race," Schar said. "Ronald Reagan once said Republicans should not speak ill of other Republicans. When they look at the issues they will realize Sam Walls is the conservative candidate here."

Walls is a leading businessman in Johnson County and a former Republican Party chairman. The winner of the runoff is expected to succeed Arlene Wohlgemuth in the Texas Legislature.

Pictures of Walls in women's clothing -- several of which were provided to the Star-Telegram -- began circulating late last week around Burleson and Cleburne.

Walls had said on Monday that he would appear before the executive committee. Instead, he sent a friend, Peter Svendsen, to read a statement during the opening minutes of the meeting.

Afterward, Svendsen said the executive committee did not answer the question of who leaked the photos of Walls in women's clothing and why.

"What did they hope to gain from this," he said. "What does this have to do with his value system? He didn't lie, he didn't steal. He still has the values to represent the Republican platform."

Tamara Payne, a Burleson businesswoman who supports Orr, said the party needed to deal the issue because it involves moral and ethical values.

"If this was someone other than Sam Walls, they'd be making him step down, but because he is such a pillar of the community, they are not," Payne said before hearing the executive committee statement.

Afterward, Payne said the committee could not force Walls to withdraw from the ballot and said she was pleased with the statement that they issued.

"It states what we wanted. It's positive on family values and positive for Mr. Orr," she said.

Judd said that the committee aimed to do the right thing for Johnson County and the Republican Party. He said there were accusations from both sides that the Orr campaign had leaked the photos.

"We're calling on the candidates to conduct themselves in a manner that is above reproach," Judd said. "We didn't want to be the judge and the jury."

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