February 7, 2018

Honorable Clifford A. Rosenberger
Speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives
77 S. High St, 14th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Speaker Rosenberger:

My name is Scott Peterson and I am executive director of Checks and Balances Project. We're an investigative watchdog that focuses on sustainability issues and ethics in government.

I am writing to you to ask if the conduct of Ohio House Majority Leader Bill Seitz, which you witnessed at the now-infamous goodbye celebration for your chief of staff on January 23 in Columbus, is part of a pattern of inappropriate behavior or a one-time event?

According to multiple reports, state Sen. Matt Huffman, acting as emcee, called a female Republican candidate requesting support for her campaign a vile slang for female genitalia. He also referred to Republican state Rep. Marlene Anielski as "very unpopular," demeaning her effectiveness in the male-dominated legislature.

When Seitz took the podium, he joked about former state Sen. Cliff Hite, who resigned last October after admitting that he had "sometimes asked for hugs and talked with [a state employee] in a way that was not appropriate for a married man, father and grandfather like myself." Yet a complaint by the employee said she had rejected Hite's advances more than a dozen times over two months. Seitz, at the microphone, declared that Hite's story could be set to Marvin Gaye's song, "Let's Get It On." Pausing for laughter, he added, "Or better yet, 'The Answer Is Blowing in The Wind.'" He demeaned another female colleague in the legislature, saying she wears a "tin-foil hat."

At least one female legislator in attendance walked out. An Ashtabula County Republican candidate for state treasurer, along with four female Democratic legislators, have called for Seitz to resign. The husband and campaign manager for a female Republican state Senator called Seitz and Huffman "drunken bullies."

State Senate President Larry Obhof said consequences for Huffman are under review. But you, Mr. Speaker, said you aren't looking at further discipline of Seitz and accepted his public apology.

While we think your promise to create a bi-partisan working group is good, it does not substitute for hard questions.

The Ohio public deserves to know if this was the first and only time behavior like this from Seitz has been brought to your attention. Was Seitz accused of sexual harassment or degrading conduct toward women while a member of the Ohio Senate?

The wave of stories about sexual harassment and assaults in the workplace reveals a tragic pattern at a growing list of institutions. In too many cases, leadership learned of bad conduct, but chose not to investigate whether it was part of a larger pattern. These organizations, including Michigan State, the Cleveland Clinic, the Humane Society, Ford Motor Company, cable news, Hollywood and Congress, are paying a steep price in public trust because they did not ask the hard questions.

The Ohio Legislature can avoid adding its name to that list because the opportunity to ask hard questions is before you.

Ohioans and people across America have lowered their tolerance for business as usual. They would like to know what steps you as Speaker are taking to determine if the conduct you witnessed is or is not part of a pattern of inappropriate behavior from Seitz.

The best news would be that this was a one-time occurrence, and that Seitz follows the Ohio Ethics Commission standards that require all members:

> "Shall conduct themselves at all times so as to reflect credit upon the member's respective chamber of the General Assembly."

But given the wave of scandal at every type of major institution, now is not the time to assume that – particularly in the face of conduct you said you are not comfortable with and that has drawn national news attention.

Institutions err when they assume incidents of bad behavior by powerful individuals are one-time events. The Ohio House of Representatives need not make that mistake with a credible, outside party making a determination.

Amazingly, Seitz's comments took place just a week after you asked state House members to attend a seminar on avoiding sexual harassment. That tone deafness alone says a deeper examination should be undertaken.

Sincerely,

Scott Peterson
Executive Director
Checks and Balances Project

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Copy to: Speaker Pro Tempore Kirk Schuring
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