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Foreclosures won't hinder voters

Macomb GOP chief denies plan to challenge votes in November.

Jim Lynch and Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

One political blog accuses him of hatching "the most evil plan in modern Republican history."

Other activists say he's trying to steal votes and disenfranchise African-American voters.

But James Carabelli, chairman of the Macomb County Republican Party, said Thursday it was all a fabrication -- that he never told a reporter the GOP plans to use poll challengers to block residents with foreclosed homes from voting in November.

The interview ignited responses from across the country, with some political observers saying the very idea of linking foreclosures with voting rights could have a chilling effect on turnout.

"Sometimes it doesn't take much to keep people away from the polls," said John Klemanski, a Macomb County native who has taught political science at Oakland University for more than 20 years.

An article in the Michigan Messenger, a left-leaning political news Web site, appeared Wednesday titled: "Lose your house, lose your vote." In it, reporter Eartha Jane Melzer quoted Carabelli discussing the Macomb County Republican Party's plans for Election Day.

"We will have a list of foreclosed homes and will make sure people aren't voting from those addresses," the quote attributed to him reads.

Carabelli, however, told The Detroit News on Thursday that "I never said anything even close to that. We won't be doing voter challenges on foreclosures, and we've never had a plan to do it."

Despite Carabelli's denials, the story has generated harsh criticism of the party chairman, including a call for him to resign by one activist group. Jobs with Justice, a Detroit-based workers' rights organization, issued a release Thursday saying it will converge on the Farmington Hills campaign headquarters of Republican presidential candidate John McCain today at noon to pressure the party to abandon any plans to use foreclosure information against voters.

The Michigan Messenger article linked the foreclosure tactic in Macomb to "part of the state GOP's effort to challenge some voters on Election Day." The Messenger is one of six online

publications aided by the Center for Independent Media, a 2-year-old nonprofit funded by a variety of liberal organizations.

On Thursday, Melzer said she stands by her story "100 percent" and has clear notes on her conversation with Carabelli.

Michigan political parties are allowed to guard against election fraud through the use of poll watchers or election challengers. According to state law, challengers can:

- Challenge a person's right to vote if the challenger has a good reason to believe that person is not eligible to vote in the precinct.
- Challenge the actions of the election inspectors serving in the precinct if the challenger believes that election law is not being followed.

By Thursday, the story had leapt outside of Macomb County's political arena and caught fire online.

Project Vote, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit, nonpartisan organization promoting voter participation, issued a statement of condemnation.

"The Macomb County GOP's plan is a cynical attempt to suppress the vote of thousands of low-income and African-American voters, a replay of the 2004 threats of mass challenges," said attorney Teresa James in the statement. "Just because you're behind on your mortgage doesn't mean you lose the right to vote."

One political blog, Prometheus 6, reprinted the Michigan Messenger article under the heading "Introducing the most evil plan in modern Republican history."

The SodaHead.com opinion board ran the Messenger story under the altered headline: "GOP: Lose your home, lose your vote ... they're watching."

Jobs with Justice organizer Bill Bryce issued a statement of his own, saying: "First they stole our homes and now they are trying to steal our votes. We won't stand for it."

Macomb County's current population is 832,516, according to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments. Of those, 592,841 residents are registered to vote. As of July, there were 3,467 homes in foreclosure in Macomb County -- that's one for every 101 households.

If the goal is to disenfranchise black voters -- as suggested in a headline on the Michigan Messenger Web site -- using foreclosure lists wouldn't make much sense, according to one community activist. More than 91 percent of the population is white, while African-Americans make up 2.7 percent and Asian/Pacific Islanders make up 2.1 percent.

"If this is something proposed by Republicans to dilute the black vote in Macomb County, it could backfire simply because of the demographic makeup," said D.L. Bradley, pastor of the Bethlehem Temple Church of Clinton Township and president of the Macomb County Ministerial Alliance.

"The percentage of white residents is so much higher here, there are bound to be more of them turned away from the polls just based on sheer numbers," he said.

Foreclosure could make a voter ineligible in a precinct if he or she has moved to a location outside the area more than 60 days prior. But a list of foreclosures would not necessarily provide poll watchers with all the information they need. Someone who has been foreclosed on may still be living in the home or they might have relocated to another residence inside the same voting district.

That's one of several reasons Republican officials at the state level believe the Michigan Messenger article is off-base.

"This story is not true," said Bill Nowling, spokesman for the Michigan Republican Party. "Clearly the Michigan Messenger has no interest in verifying fact. Jim said he never said that, and I believe him."

Nowling said the same reporter who called Carabelli called the party's legal counsel for verification and was told there was no plan to use foreclosure lists.

"Our legal counsel said it's not true," Nowling said. "But are they quoted in the story? No."

Despite the denials, one longtime Macomb County Democrat said he isn't completely convinced that Republicans would not try to keep voters from the polls that way. "If (Carabelli) never said that, I'm glad," said Macomb County Commissioner Ed Bruley, who also chairs the county's Democratic Party.

Jefferson Morley, the editorial director of the Center for Independent Media, said the organization stood by the story and its reporter. Melzer won honorable mention in a National Press Club contest this year for her reporting on Sovereign Deed, a controversial security company seeking to set up an operation in Emmet County.

"It's clear to me that he said what he said, and it's not surprising that they would have second thoughts about that sentiment, because it's not an attractive one," said Morley, a former writer and editor for the Washington Post, Spin and The Nation.

He pointed out that the publication was tough on Democrats too, including criticism of Gov. Jennifer Granholm in its reporting on Sovereign Deed. "We don't favor Democrats, we favor accountability," he said.

You can reach Jim Lynch at (586) 468-0520 or jlynch@detnews.com.