

GOP sees backlash to party bylaws

Suit alleges that removing elected officials, disavowal of candidates violates law

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A motley group of Republicans and GOP central committees has sued their state party over new rules regarding which candidates can and cannot fly the Republican banner.

Critics of those new rules said in the Tuesday court filing that the Montana

Republican Party had overstepped state election laws when it enacted bylaws last month giving GOP leadership the power to remove duly elected precinct committee members who do not yield to the party's standards. Those bylaws also hobble fair elections, the plaintiffs argue, because GOP leaders can muddy the process by asserting Republican candidates are fraudulent members of the party.

A day after the plaintiffs filed the complaint, District Court Judge Mike McMahon in Helena granted their motion to pause those new bylaws until further arguments will be made in court on Monday.

The legal effort is a rebuke of the Montana Republican Party's direction under chair Art Wittich, who rose to the top of the party last year on the premise that Republicans who engage with Democrats at the Legislature are unworthy of the Republican brand.

"The Party cannot dictate what brands of Republicanism are on the market," attorneys for the plaintiffs said in Tuesday's petition.

The plaintiffs include the Yellowstone County Republican Central Committee, Chouteau County's Republican Central Committee, Red Lodge Republican state

Rep. Brad Barker, former Republican Party Chair Jeff Essmann and a handful of others.

In a response emailed to the Montana State News Bureau, Wittich said party officials were still preparing their response to the petition.

"We just became aware of the suit last night," Wittich said through a spokesperson. "We are still reviewing the allegations. We will be ready at — and look forward to — our first opportunity to defend our State Central Committee's passage of the 2026

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SOLITARY ANGLER



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An angler wades July 5 near the East Bank Recreation Site on the Big Hole River.

Ruling: PACs violated state law

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Montana's political commissioner decided on Wednesday that three groups that spent heavily to bolster moderate candidates in this year's state GOP primaries have been operating out of compliance with campaign finance rules.

Big Sky Fiscal Guardians and Treasure State Stewards spent about \$103,000 on political activities in the last primary cycle. Because of their statuses as "incidental" committees, the groups did not have to disclose any of their donors. Montana Business Advocates for Sensible Elections gave \$38,000 to a separate high-profile PAC but never filed as a political committee.

As these groups started to pop up on campaign finance reports leading up to the primary, their reported spending was exclusively in support of centrist Republican candidates, against their hardline opponents or going to another PAC that was spending significant sums to boost moderates. Additionally, the groups' finance reports would show negative balances since they did not have to report where the money was coming from, only what they were spending.

These reports raised eyebrows and, ultimately, drew a complaint with the Commissioner of Political Practices.

That complaint, filed in April by a Stevensville resident, asked Christopher Gallus, the commissioner, to investigate whether Big Sky Fiscal Guardians and Treasure State Stewards should have to register as "independent" political committees rather than "incidental" committees. The latter requires that a group's primary purpose fall outside politics and allows such groups to spend on elections without disclosing their donors. Independent committees, by comparison, are expressly political but must list their donors.

The complaint also requested Gallus look into whether the Business Advocates committee had broken election law by spending on politics without registering at all.

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New women's prison plan nixed

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The Montana Department of Corrections is scrapping its plans for a new women's prison a year after state lawmakers put \$250 million in the bank to spend on an expansion.

State prison officials will instead explore how a swap between the Pine Hills Youth Correctional Facility in Miles City and the Riverside women's prison in Boulder could create more relief on county jails, where dozens of women who have been sentenced to prison are awaiting a bed in a state prison facility.

It's not just the women's population, either. For years, state officials have struggled to manage its overall inmate population, which has outgrown its prisons, both state-run and those operated by contractors such as CoreCivic.

By looking inward at its existing prison spaces, the Department of Corrections abandons its effort over the last year to identify a location for an entirely new

women's prison. After residents in Butte bristled at the prospect of bringing a prison to town, the department began eyeing Deer Lodge, Boulder, Anaconda and Billings — areas where the state already operates facilities and, in several cases, owns large tracts of land.

In a statement on Thursday, Department of Corrections Director Eric Strauss said using existing infrastructure would be the most nimble course of action.

"It will also maintain our commitments to our employees and the communities where these facilities are located," Strauss said.

The math works this way: Pine Hills has 144 beds, but only averages about 30 juvenile inmates, according to the department. The Riverside women's prison in Boulder has 50 beds, and the Montana Women's Prison has 250; this system is at capacity, and about 65 women in DOC custody are still waiting for placement in a prison.

By moving the juvenile prisoners to

Boulder and the 50 women currently in Boulder, along with the 65 women in county jails, to Pine Hills, the women's prison population would be fully imprisoned and no longer burdening the county jails.

The department said Thursday it will work with the state architecture and engineering division and the governor's budget office to develop an analysis for how to best repurpose the Riverside and Pine Hills facilities for this proposal.

It's unlikely, though, that the cost of such a project would rise to the \$250 million appropriated for a new prison by the 2025 Legislature. That arrangement was approved by way of House Bill 833, which set out conditions for that quarter-billion dollars, which included "renovation of existing facilities," among other options.

The bill specified that the state budget director would ultimately determine matters such as whether the proposed

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COLUMBIA FALLS ALUMINUM CO.

Superfund cleanup deal OK'd

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The federal process to clean up a sprawling Superfund site at the edge of the Flathead Valley took a leap forward this week, with the responsible company agreeing to a \$57 million remediation plan for toxic contamination at the former Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. site.

Under a proposed consent decree between the Environmental Protection Agency and Glencore Ltd., the parent company of

CFAC, the responsible companies will agree to conduct remediation work outlined in a plan finalized in January 2025. It also must reimburse the EPA for \$1.8 million in past work at the site.

The EPA is accepting public comments on the consent decree for one month, after which a federal judge will need to sign off on it before the agreement becomes effective. The public can provide comments through the U.S. Department of Justice through

Aug. 6 at justice.gov/enrd/consent-decrees.

Multiple companies operated the aluminum smelting facility north of Columbia Falls from 1955 until its closure in 2009. The industrial processes generated large amounts of toxic waste materials, much of which was dumped in unlined landfills on the 960-acre property.

"Over time, arsenic, cyanide and fluoride leached out

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BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Glencore Ltd. agreed to a \$57 million remediation plan for toxic contamination at the former Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. site.