



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **In Case You Missed It**

# **Sec. of State Faces Scathing Ethics Allegations**

*Former state elections chief: [I have] never worked in such a crooked organization.*

Albuquerque, NM—As reported in the *Albuquerque Journal*, the state’s Bureau of Elections director, AJ Salazar, resigned last week after only 11 months on the job. In his resignation letter, the former elections chief accused NM Secretary of State Mary Herrera of violating state election laws and “soliciting money from firms that contract with her office and ordering ‘exempt’ employees to obtain petition signatures for her re-election campaign.”

Salazar’s letter to Herrera noted, “Your administration engages in political activity in the office, during work hours.” “This is completely inappropriate coming from any elected official—especially from the Chief Elections Officer of the State.”

“I hope the attorney general investigates these serious allegations which indicate that the secretary of state may have broken the law,” stated Janel Causey, RPNM communications director. “The people of New Mexico deserve a secretary of state who is committed to abiding by the very laws that this office is responsible for upholding. If these allegations are true, at best, Ms. Herrera has abused her position and misused office resources. Regardless, taxpayers should not have to foot the bill for Ms. Herrera’s political activities.”

The allegations brought by Salazar, a former deputy district attorney, come 10 days after a recent news story revealed that Mary Herrera included family photographs in the state’s Blue Book—the official guide to state government and culture in New Mexico. Herrera defended her actions, saying she wouldn’t reimburse taxpayers for including her family photographs because this section of the book was good for tourism.

The *Albuquerque Journal* article is printed below in its entirety.

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# Sec. of State Faces Scathing Ethics Allegations

**Albuquerque Journal**

Read this online at: <http://www.abqjournal.com/news/state/042250161798newsstate03-04-10.htm>

**By Vic Vela**

*Journal Northern Bureau*

SANTA FE — The former state elections chief is accusing Secretary of State Mary Herrera of soliciting money from firms that contract with her office and ordering "exempt" employees to obtain petition signatures for her re-election campaign.

In a blistering resignation letter obtained by the Journal on Wednesday, AJ Salazar alleges that Herrera violated the state's Governmental Conduct Act as well as election laws.

Salazar stepped down as Bureau of Elections director last week after 11 months on the job.

A former deputy district attorney, he said Wednesday that he "has never worked in such a crooked organization."

Herrera denies any wrongdoing, saying that Salazar's "unfounded allegations" are based on "twisted information."

"He can allege whatever he likes," Herrera said in an interview. "But I'm telling you I've done nothing wrong."

Salazar said that the state Attorney General's Office "has been made aware of these particular issues." A spokesman for the AG's office would neither confirm nor deny that the office is looking into the issues raised by Salazar.

Salazar was appointed elections director, responsible for managing statewide elections as well as overseeing governmental ethics and campaign finance filings, in April 2009. When he took the job, Salazar became the third person in eight months to fill the position.

In his resignation letter to Herrera dated Friday, Salazar said that "during my tenure in your office it has become abundantly clear to me as to why my predecessors have left the office."

Salazar wrote that Herrera "insisted that we obtain 'sponsorships' or donations through targeted communications with firms or businesses with whom we contract" to support elections seminars, training events for county clerks from across the state.

When Salazar sought advice from the Secretary of State's Office counsel at the Attorney General's Office about "the legalities" of the sponsorships, Herrera accused him of "going over" her head, Salazar said in his letter.

"You stated that sponsorships are not donations and I should focus on other tasks," Salazar wrote.

But Deputy Secretary of State Don Francisco Trujillo II — who was on the phone with Herrera during a Journal interview Wednesday — said that it had been a "practice" in the past to seek out sponsorships for the seminars. Trujillo said the Secretary of State's Office took Salazar's advice and brought the issue to the attention of a lawyer who advised against continuing the practice.

Salazar also alleged that Herrera ordered her so-called "governor's exempt employees" — political hires outside the standard state employee personnel system — to each gather 1,000 petition signatures for Herrera's re-election campaign during an October meeting in her office.

"Your administration engages in political activity in the office, during work hours," Salazar wrote in his letter. "This is completely inappropriate coming from any elected official — especially from the Chief Elections Officer of the State."

Herrera denied she did anything wrong during the meeting, which she said took place "during the lunch hour" and did not occur on the taxpayers' dime.

Herrera admitted that petitions were brought up during the meeting and that some people volunteered to help her gather signatures, but that's not what the meeting was about. "Nothing was handed to my employees by me," she said.

Herrera said she met with Salazar after the meeting and that he expressed his concern over the re-election petitions. She said that after the discussion, "we agreed that we were going to be the leaders of ethics and follow the governmental code of conduct." She said the matter of petitions was never brought up in her office again.

But Salazar has a different recollection of the meeting. "Nothing was ever voluntary," he said. "We were ordered." Salazar said the meeting took place at 3:30 in the afternoon and not lunch time.

"It happened with government resources, in a government office, regardless of time," he said.

Salazar also is objecting to other activities at the Secretary of State's Office, such as a lax chain of custody for voting machines.

Salazar said that part of the reason why he resigned was because his concerns fell on deaf ears. "I requested time and time and time again to meet with her about these issues and I was ignored," he said.

Herrera said she is "really surprised and disappointed" in Salazar's allegations and that she thinks "highly of him."

When asked why there's been so much turnover in the elections director position, Herrera said, "They're lawyers. They move on."

"Who knows why," she said. "It's their decision. Maybe it's the pay. But the bottom line is we get customers served here and we've run the best elections ever."

Salazar said he's prepared "to cooperate with any subsequent investigation."

Phil Sisneros, spokesman for the Attorney General's Office, would not comment on the matter. "If, in fact, allegations like that were to have come to our office, we certainly would look into that," Sisneros said.

"I'm gonna tell the truth," Salazar said. "Apparently that's not what they (Herrera) wanted to hear in that administration. My conscience is absolutely clear. I did the right thing."

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