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SAVE AND SHARE

Pa. Attorney General candidate criticizes radio ads

By David Spett
Inquirer Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG - The Democratic nominee for state attorney general has criticized incumbent Tom Corbett for spending hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars on public service announcements in the Philadelphia region.

The spots, which have aired on radio stations over the last two summers at a cost of about \$625,000, take aim at illegal gun purchases.

But John Morganelli, the Northampton County district attorney, says they are thinly veiled campaign ads for Corbett, a Republican.

"The attorney general should not be using tax dollars to raise his name ID in Philadelphia," Morganelli said.

Corbett's campaign counters that Morganelli is wrongly criticizing a bipartisan effort that effectively deters gun violence.

Corbett and Philadelphia District Attorney Lynne M. Abraham, a Democrat, said they use the announcement to educate the public about a gun violence prevention program they run.

In the 60-second announcement, Corbett and Abraham warn listeners that if they buy a gun for a criminal, an act known as a "straw" purchase, they will go to jail.

"Making a straw purchase for a criminal, who may go on to kill an innocent child, is like pulling the trigger yourself," Corbett says after introducing himself in the announcement.

"My office and the District Attorney's Office created a gun task force in Philadelphia," he adds.

That task force was created in 2006, and has an annual budget of \$5 million. The ads represent about 6 percent of that.

The money would be better spent on more police officers and detectives to carry out sting operations on drug dealers, Morganelli argued. He also criticized Corbett for increasing spending on the announcements by 15 percent over last summer, from about \$290,000 to \$335,000. The announcements air on 19 stations, compared with nine last summer.

Kevin Harley, Corbett's spokesman, said the announcements were not campaign-related. "It doesn't say, 'Vote for Tom Corbett,'" he said, adding that there is no question they deter straw purchases.

"We've had defendants say, 'I knew you were coming. I heard it on the radio that you guys were arresting people for this,'" Harley said.

"We've had a ton of phone calls into our agents [from people] saying, 'I have this gun. I don't know what to do with it.

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What do I do?' "

The task force has led to the arrests of more than 200 people, and 425 weapons have been seized, he said.

Barry Kauffman, executive director of the watchdog group Common Cause Pennsylvania, said the announcement had a reasonable and "probably important" message, but contained political overtones.

Kauffman pointed out that about 10 seconds of the ad were spent identifying public officials.

"Maybe that time could have been used to announce a toll-free number if you have information you want to provide," Kauffman said.

Common Cause discourages use of public funds to identify any candidate unless all candidates in a particular race are identified, within 60 to 90 days of an election. Corbett's announcement will run until Monday, 57 days before the November election.

Abraham speaks for about half of the announcement but has no control over funding it, said Cathie Abookire, her spokeswoman. Abraham declined to comment regarding Morganelli's accusations that the ads were political, Abookire added.

Contact staff writer David Spett at 717-236-7402.

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