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Militia ties haunt campaign

By Gene Metrick

The Western Front

Skip Richards' alleged ties to militia groups continue to trouble his campaign for the state Senate.

The Republican candidate in the 40th District race issued a press release Oct. 25 demanding a correction from the Bellingham Herald for an Oct. 24 article that stated he had "admitted that militia members have attended meetings of his land-use coalition."

"I have never met any of those persons who have been associated with militia activity in Whatcom County," Richards said in the release.

John Servais, director of the local news web site Northwest Citizen, said he has video and audio recordings of Coalition for Land Use Education meetings that prove Richards' press statement "evidenced either incredible bad memory or was a knowingly false statement."

"I'm not suggesting anybody not vote for him, or that he is a member of a militia or endorses militia causes," Servais said. "I'm just saying his press release is a lie."

Richards dismisses Servais'

charges as a character smear to hurt his candidacy.

"This is an attempt to discredit me politically," he said. "It's done right before the election, so it obviously has a political motivation."

Servais, who achieved a reputation as a public watchdog in 1991 for exposing a land development scam that cost the Port of Bellingham millions of dollars, said he felt a responsibility to speak out because of the information he possessed.

"If he hadn't come out with such a blanket denial of his past, I would not have come forward," he said.

"Mr. Servais has gone beyond the information that he refers to," Richards said. "He's drawn conclusions that aren't even supported by the documents he refers to."

The Front has obtained a video tape of an Oct. 22, 1994 CLUE meeting in which Richards introduced Ben Sams, an alleged member of the Christian Patriot group, along with a copy of Sams' affidavit renouncing his U.S. citizenship and declaring himself a citizen of the "Republic of Washington."

"We have invited many people

to speak in front of our group," Richards said. "We always have a disclaimer that we don't endorse what they say."

Although no mention of any militia affiliation was made at the meeting, which was about the proposed North Cascade International Park, the speakers presented a variety of conspiracy theories about a possible United Nations takeover of Washington State.

"This isn't about a meeting in 1994, it's about the election of 1993 when I got a county land-use referendum passed," Richards said, adding that he believed local environmentalists still begrudge him for that effort.

"This man (Servais) has allowed himself to be used," Richards said.

Dal Neitzel of Vidcom Productions, a local production company, said he has seen militia members at CLUE meetings.

"Skip was hosting these meetings," he said. "These were open-to-the-public meetings and many of those invited were members of militias, some who also addressed the meetings."

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Neitzel said he videotaped the Oct. 22 meeting as part of a project he was doing about the Northwest Ecosystem Alliance because he knew its founder, Mitch Friedman, was going to attend.

Friedman also confirmed the presence of militia members at the Oct. 22 meeting.

“He’s been utilizing these militias for his own political purposes, and now he’s distancing himself from them,” he said. “Is that the kind of accountability we want from our politicians?”

“No person that I’ve ever met has represented themselves to me as belonging to any group of that kind,” Richards said.

“For him to not know they’re militia members is incredulous,” Servais said. “He’s a very smart man.”

“I’m not going to spend much time on this, but after the election I’ll be meeting with my attorney to consider legal action against the various parties involved,” Richards said.