

Lt. Gov. nominee a major headache for Quinn, Democrats

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Gov. Pat Quinn takes questions about his new running mate, Scott Lee Cohen at news conference. (Alex Garcia/Tribune)

Gov. Pat Quinn finally won the Democratic governor nomination Thursday, only to find himself trying to dump a running mate who has been accused of abusing women, failing to pay child support and spending lavishly on extramarital affairs.

While Quinn suggested that Scott Lee Cohen drop out for the good of the Democratic Party, the pawnbroker and political neophyte vowed to continue as a lieutenant governor candidate after voters nominated him Tuesday.

"My honesty and integrity in putting it out there is the best thing that could happen to the party," Cohen told the Tribune.

His ex-wife, Debra York-Cohen, appeared with him Thursday as part of a media blitz aimed at repairing his image. York-Cohen said she stood by allegations she made during the couple's divorce, but that Cohen's bad behavior took place when he was using steroids.

"It was a short period of time, and it's certainly not something that the people of Illinois need to be concerned with," York-Cohen said.

But new disclosures showed that even as Cohen was spending more than \$2 million of his own money to run TV and radio ads for his campaign, his ex-wife in December was accusing him in court of being \$54,000 behind in child support payments. Cohen and his ex-wife declined to discuss the ongoing case.

The latest details came after the Tribune reported Wednesday that police and court records from an October 2005 incident show that Cohen's then-girlfriend alleged he put a knife to her throat and pushed her head against a wall. Public records show that the woman, his 24-year-old girlfriend at the time, pleaded guilty to prostitution that same month.

The misdemeanor charges against Cohen were later dropped when the woman did not show up for court. Cohen also denied allegations he physically assaulted her and used a knife.

Cohen said Thursday he didn't know the woman was a prostitute and met her when he got a "straight massage" at the Eden Spa.

But a [Glenview](#) police report indicates his ex-girlfriend freely told an undercover officer posing as a massage customer that women there performed sex acts for money. The April 2005 report detailed a sexual act that Cohen's ex-girlfriend performed for \$150, then told the undercover officer that the spa operator "is well-aware of what the girls are doing."

Fearful Cohen could drag down Illinois Democrats in the November election, Quinn said the candidate has "an obligation to step aside" if he can't suitably explain himself to voters -- a sentiment echoed by other Democratic leaders.

Some top Democrats are giving Cohen room to maneuver as he weighs his options. That's partly out of necessity -- there's no legal avenue for the party to remove Cohen as the lieutenant governor nominee.

So for now, they wait.

"We think there'll be enough political pressure placed on him, enough media pressure surrounding his past, that he will drop out," said one [Chicago](#) Democrat who spent more than 20 minutes Thursday with lawmakers discussing the Cohen issue.

For his part, Cohen left himself an out.

"If the people of Illinois decided they don't want me as their lieutenant governor, I would consider it at that point," Cohen said on WTTW's "[Chicago](#) Tonight." "Time will tell."

Still, Cohen maintained that his candidacy is "a strength for the party."

"I'm the guy that's going to help the governor to come up with these creative ways to bring in revenue," he said.

As Cohen sought to set the record straight, documents from his 2005 divorce case portrayed a troubled marriage. They show that York-Cohen accused him of abusive behavior, including choking her.

"Over the past year my husband has been taking injectable anabolic steroids, including but not limited to Winstrol, Creatine, and Steen, and as a result he has an erratic, explosive temper," York-Cohen said in a petition for an order of protection. She described rages at their children and his admission to several affairs, and alleged he tried to force himself on her sexually.

Cohen responded to some of the allegations in his petition to visit his children during the couple's separation.

"Although I may have taken steroids and or performance enhancing drugs in the past I have not utilized any of these drugs in the last two weeks. ... Although from time to time I have screamed and yelled at my children, that is my parenting style and my prerogative. I have never abused my children, I have never hurt my children and I have never done any harm to them," Cohen said, according to the records.

On Thursday, Cohen told the Tribune he obtained the steroids without a prescription. He said he got them through friends.

The whole storm has the potential to be a disaster for Democrats in the fall campaign as they try to keep their tenuous hold on state government after the scandal that led to ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich's ouster.

"I think as a party that is coming off of the impeachment of a governor and trying to lead a state in difficult financial times, the last thing we need are unnecessary distractions," said state Rep. John Fritchey, D-[Chicago](#). "You're not going to find somebody who thinks this is a good thing unless it's a Republican."

Indeed, the situation became yet another card for Republicans to play, even though their governor contest remains undecided. Minutes after Cohen vowed to stay on the ticket, some Republicans were calling on Democratic candidates to disavow Cohen.

Late Thursday, Democratic U.S. Senate nominee Alexi Giannoulias, who heads the statewide ticket, called on Cohen to step down.

Democratic leaders acknowledged that the revelations about Cohen represent a grave situation for the ticket. At the same time, they also said they weren't panicking and that the early primary date gives them time to work out a solution.

Steve Brown, spokesman for state Democratic Chairman Michael Madigan, the House speaker, said he viewed the Cohen disclosures to be a "radically different situation" from the 1986 primary debacle when Democratic voters nominated two followers of political extremist Lyndon LaRouche for lieutenant governor and secretary of state.

That forced governor candidate Adlai E. Stevenson III to flee the Democratic ticket and form a third party. He lost.

Instead, Democratic leaders said the Cohen disclosures are more akin to the 2004 Republican U.S. Senate primary. Nominee Jack Ryan quit because of damaging divorce-file disclosures involving his former wife, actress Jeri Lynn Ryan.

If Cohen drops out, the 38-member Democratic State Central Committee would select a replacement.

Quinn, who earlier in the day had received the news that primary opponent Dan Hynes was conceding their tight primary race, said he had spoken with Madigan about the process for finding a new lieutenant governor nominee should Cohen step down.

"In those circumstances, then the state central committee has to come together and they have to select a replacement," Quinn said. "Any of those who are interested in vying for something will have to wait."

Cohen's victory caught many Democrats off guard.

The 44-year-old divorced father of four won in large part because his self-financed campaign dumped thousands of direct-mail pieces and scores of television commercials late in the race that showed him hosting job fairs for the unemployed. Although he only garnered 212,900 votes, it helped him defeat more established opponents, including state Rep. Art Turner and state Sens. Rickey Hendon and Terry Link.

With Democratic power brokers focused on local races for governor, Cook County Board president or Senate, the lesser-known lieutenant governor's race slipped well under the radar.

There was little media coverage or public scrutiny of the candidates for a job that carries little political power but is just a heartbeat -- or an impeachment -- away from being the state's chief executive. Even his opponents never made a large issue of it.

Cohen argues the public shouldn't either.

"Everybody makes mistakes, and that's what happened to me," Cohen said. "It has no bearing on me leading the people of Illinois."

Tribune reporters David Kidwell, Robert Becker, Ray Long, Michelle Manchir, Rick Pearson and Stacy St. Clair contributed to this report.

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