

Schillerstrom says Birkett crossed line

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Can't these guys just get along?

DuPage County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom and State's Attorney Joseph Birkett are at it again.

Schillerstrom said Tuesday he's "surprised and dismayed" Birkett — a candidate for lieutenant governor — is dabbling in local politics by endorsing a friend in a county board race.

"His efforts should be focused on his race and not on other races," he said.

Birkett fired right back.

"I'm tired of hearing about Bob Schillerstrom's antics through the paper," Birkett said. "If he's got something like that to say, he can pick up the phone and call me."

This is hardly the first time Schillerstrom and Birkett haven't seen eye to eye.

Most recently, Birkett threatened to sue the county board over its decision to adopt new rules expanding Schillerstrom's power. The board eventually relented and rescinded the changes.

However, Schillerstrom might not be alone in criticizing Birkett's decision to back Jerry "J.R." McBride, who is running against incumbent Grant Eckhoff in District 4.

Birkett acknowledges he's gotten "a lot of grief" since deciding to endorse the 38-year-old Glen Ellyn insurance broker. McBride is the only county board candidate Birkett is endorsing.

"Generally speaking, especially when you are involved in a statewide race, the admonition is always, 'Don't get involved in local races,' Birkett said. "This is an exception. He (McBride) is a dear friend of mine."

McBride and Birkett have known each other for about 15 years. In the past, McBride did volunteer work and helped raise money for Birkett's campaigns.

So when McBride was considering a run for county board he talked to Birkett about it. "He told me, 'Do it. Go after it,'æ" McBride recalled.

And as soon as McBride decided to take aim at Eckhoff's seat, Birkett called the incumbent to let him know he was supporting his opponent.

Eckhoff said he can see why Birkett would support a friend. But other than playing basketball together and working on a couple of campaigns, Eckhoff said he doesn't know what kind of contact Birkett has had with McBride.

"I understand it's because he thinks McBride's a good guy — maybe a good power forward," Eckhoff said.

Schillerstrom, meanwhile, says his endorsement of Eckhoff is based on the 46-year-old Wheaton attorney's contributions to the board since first being elected four years ago.

"The bottom line is: In a relatively short amount of time Grant has shown himself to be a leader," Schillerstrom said. "I have grown to rely on him. I think he's one of the stars of the board."

Birkett, though, says Schillerstrom doesn't even know McBride.

"I know both candidates," he said. "Bob doesn't. He doesn't know anything about his (McBride's) commitment to the community."

Birkett stressed that he's not endorsing McBride just because of their friendship.

"Jerry is the kind of person we need on the county board," Birkett said. "And quite frankly, you're not going to find many people anywhere with the character traits and the devotion to family and service that this guy has."