

May 15, 2026

Senate Ethics Committee
Iowa State Capitol
Des Moines, IA

Re: Ulrich v. Wahls Ethics Complaint

Dear Chairman Evans, Vice Chair Shipley, Ranking Member Winkler, Senator Dawson, Senator Petersen, and Senator Staed:

I am counsel for Senator Zach Wahls. Sen. Wahls denies each allegation made against him in the Ethics Complaint filed by Kathy Ulrich, a confirmed supporter of Sen. Wahls's US Senate primary opponent, (<https://www.facebook.com/rob.hogg.56/posts/pfbid0t1HXK3CUcsx2bWvvhbViAtHFgpLmdrQ4zDYNXrcps7KQZL62HhrsuvRaMXLFzcN7ml>) with the Senate Ethics Committee in the closing hours of the 2026 legislative session. Ms. Ulrich alleges that Sen. Wahls violated Section 6 of the Senate Code of Ethics through his former employment with the Next 50 Network, LLC. Sen. Wahls was employed by the Next 50 Network LLC from January 1, 2024, until April 30, 2025. A full year after his employment ended and one month before a competitive statewide primary, in the closing hours of Sen. Wahls's final legislative session, this Complaint is filed.

This Complaint is a frivolous accusation that carries the stain of political mudslinging more than concern for the ethical rules of the Senate. Because the Next 50 Network, LLC is just that – a limited liability company – and not a political action committee or an organization formed under section 501(c)(4), 501(c)(6), or 527 of the Internal Revenue Code that engages in activities related to the nomination, election, or defeat of a candidate for public office; and because Sen. Wahls faithfully followed the written guidance of Secretary of the Senate Charlie Smithson and took steps before and during his employment to adhere to his ethical responsibilities as an Iowa State Senator, Sen. Wahls respectfully requests that the Ethics Committee dismiss the complaint and reaffirm that the ethics process is for serious matters and not attempting to score cheap political campaign points.

Sen. Wahls Former Employment

Sen. Wahls served as the Executive Director of the Next 50 Network LLC from January 1, 2024, through April 30, 2025. His employer, as clearly stated on the US Senate disclosure form the complainant cites, was Next 50 Network, LLC. An LLC, of course, is a limited liability company. It is not a political committee. It is not a 501(c)(4), 501 (c)(6), or 527 organization. Indeed, those are whole separate tax statuses from an LLC. The Next 50 Network does have registered political action committees and suborganizations. None are in Iowa. None were active in Iowa during Sen. Wahls's time as Executive Director. Before accepting his position as Executive Director, Sen. Wahls sought guidance from the Secretary of the Senate. Secretary of the Senate Charlie Smithson sent Sen. Wahls written guidance

advising him that so long as his employment arrangement was with the LLC and not any entity overseen by the LLC then he would not be in violation of Senate rules. (ATTACHMENT 1)

Sen. Wahls resigned his position effective April 30, 2025. While Sen. Wahls was the Executive Director, the Next 50 Network did not engage in any political activity in Iowa. (ATTACHMENT 2) Indeed, the Next 50 Network sent Sen. Wahls a letter accepting his resignation and stating that it would reassess its policy of neutrality in Iowa and would consider making political endorsements. (ATTACHMENT 3)

Senate Code of Ethics

The Senate Code of Ethics provides that “A senator shall not accept employment, either directly or indirectly, from a political action committee or from an organization exempt from taxation under section 501(c)(4), 501 (c)(6), or 527 of the Internal Revenue Code that engages in activities related to the nomination, election, or defeat of a candidate for public office.” Senate Code of Ethics Sec. 6. The Code of Ethics goes on to define what a “political action committee” is:

For purposes of this rule, a political action committee means a committee, but not a candidate’s committee, which accepts contributions, makes expenditures, or incurs indebtedness in the aggregate of more than one thousand dollars in any one calendar year to expressly advocate the nomination, election, or defeat of a candidate for public office or to expressly advocate the passage or defeat of a ballot issue or influencing legislative action, or an association, lodge, society, cooperative, union, fraternity, sorority, educational institution, civic organization, labor organization, religious organization, or professional organization which makes contributions in the aggregate of more than one thousand dollars in any one calendar year to advocate the nomination, election or defeat of a candidate for public office or ballot issue or influencing legislative action.

Code of Ethics, Sec. 6.

The Senate Code of Ethics definition of “political action committee” is identical to the definition of “political committee” in Iowa Code section 68A.102(18). This is not an accident. The Senate is ensuring that its political employment restriction is within the bounds of Iowa law.

The Ethics definition and Code definition each make two references to candidates for “public office.” This term is defined in the Iowa Code to mean, “any state, county, city, or school office to be filled by election.” Iowa Code § 68A.102(20). Thus, to be a political action committee under the Senate rules and the state Code, the committee must make contributions or expenditures in excess of \$1,000 to support or oppose candidates running in Iowa state or local elections. Sen. Wahls was not employed by a political action committee. None of the political committees associated with Sen. Wahls’s employer made a contribution or expenditure in support of or opposition to any candidate in any race in Iowa. Accordingly, the Complaint must be dismissed.

The Allegations Against Senator Wahls

The Complaint makes ten factual allegations against Sen. Wahls attempting to paint his employment as a sinister dark money machine the sum of which adds up to an ethics violation. When examined more fully, the sum in fact equals zero.

“1. Senator Wahls served as the Executive Director of an organization called the Next 50 from January 2024 to April 2025.”

As the screen print from Sen. Wahls’s US Senate financial disclosure shows, he was employed by the Next 50 Network LLC. An LLC is not a political committee. Nor did this LLC engage in political activity that would qualify it as a political committee under Senate rules or Iowa law. Nor is it a 501(c)(4) or (c)(6) or 527 organization under the federal tax code. Moreover, Sen. Wahls sought and received guidance from the Secretary of the Senate that this employment arrangement would not violate Senate ethics rules. While the claim is true, it lacks substance and any understanding of the facts.

“2. In addition, Sen. Wahls served as an Officer of Next 50 Action, a designated 501(c)(4) from January 2024 to April 2025.”

As Executive Director of Next 50 Network LLC, Sen. Wahls held a non-voting, *ex officio* role with a subsidiary 501(c)(4) of the LLC. Sen. Wahls was not employed by Next 50 Action directly or indirectly. He did not receive any compensation from Next 50 Action. He disclosed this role as part of his US Senate candidate disclosure in response to the question seeking information on any outside position Sen. Wahls held. Indeed, the very next position listed is for the Housing Trust Fund of Johnson County. (ATTACHMENT 4)

Even if Sen. Wahls had been employed indirectly by Next 50 Action, it would not have been a violation of the Senate Ethics Code. As summarized above, a 501(c)(4) would have to engage “in activities related to the nomination, election, or defeat of a candidate for public office.” Senate Code of Ethics section 6. However, there is no evidence provided by the Complainant nor is there even the allegation that Next 50 Action did anything related to the nomination, election, or defeat of any candidate for state, county, city, or school office in Iowa during Sen. Wahls’s tenure as Executive Director. In fact, Next 50 Action did not make an independent expenditure or any other act related to an Iowa candidate’s campaign. Thus, there was nothing wrong with Sen. Wahls serving in this volunteer role.

“3. Next 50 Action is a designated 501(c)(4).”

Sen. Wahls was not employed by Next 50 Action, directly or indirectly. Next 50 Action did not take any action related to the nomination, election, or defeat of any candidate for state, county, city or school office in Iowa during Sen. Wahls’s tenure as Executive Director of Next 50 Network LLC. Thus, Next 50 Action’s status as a 501(c)(4) organization is irrelevant to Sen. Wahls’s former employment and does not establish a violation of the Senate Code of Ethics.

“4. During Senator Wahls’ tenure leading the web of the Next 50 political organizations, Next 50 Action’s address is repeated listed as 1507 Winterpark Dr. Coralville, IA on ActBlue technical service filings with the IRS. Sen. Wahls has repeatedly identified the same address – 1507 Winterpark Dr. Coralville, IA – as his home address.”

Sen. Wahls has established that he was not employed by Next 50 Action. The Complaint fails to allege any political activity by Next 50 Action in Iowa while Sen. Wahls was employed by Next 50 Network LLC. The fact that Sen. Wahls's address appears to be on an ActBlue technical filing is of no moment. Indeed, in the era of work-from-home and remote work, it is not unusual to use a home address out of convenience, as was the case here.

"5. Wahls touted the Next 50 in his Iowa Senate Democrats bio and promoted the organization's 2024 Impact Report via his "X" account."

As the Ethics Committee knows, serving in the Iowa Senate is a part-time engagement. Nearly every other Senator has a job outside the Senate, whether as teacher, farmer, lawyer, small business owner, or other career. Nearly every other Senator references their professional career in their Senate biographies. It would be odd for Sen. Wahls not to include a reference to the Next 50 in his biography, and it is wholly unremarkable that he would tout his organization on social media. None of that amounts to a violation of the Senate Code of Ethics.

"6. The Next 50 is a network of federal PACs, including a hybrid SuperPAC and 501(c)(4)s."

In support of this contention, the Complaint lists four entities registered as Federal PACs with the FEC, and the 501(c)(4) entity previously discussed. The first PAC is listed as the Next 50 Victory Committee. There does not appear to be any PAC under that name registered with the FEC. However, there is a Next Generation Majority Fund with the same registration number (C00906412). This PAC registered with the FEC on May 27, 2025, after Sen. Wahls resigned from the Next 50 Network LLC making it literally impossible for him to have anything of any sort to do with it.

The Next 50 PAC registered with the FEC on August 20, 2019. This PAC was in existence while Sen. Wahls worked for Next 50 Network LLC. Next 50's Compliance Officer explained that the PAC made no contributions to Iowa candidates while Sen. Wahls was Executive Director, and that Sen. Wahls did not make decisions about who the PAC endorsed or to whom it made contributions. Furthermore, to suggest that Sen. Wahls violated the Senate Code of Ethics because his employer, Next 50 Network LLC, has an associated PAC would have far reaching consequences. Taken to its logical end, it would mean that no Senator could work for Principal, John Deere, be an ISEA member teacher, or work any union job because their employer has an affiliated PAC. (ATTACHMENT 3)

The Next 50 Alumni PAC and the Next 50 Enterprise Fund both filed statements of organization with the FEC on April 25, 2025. Sen. Wahls informed the board of his intent to resign in March 2025 and resigned from the Next 50 Network LLC effective April 30, 2025. Sen. Wahls had no role with either of those PACs. How could he? The ink had barely dried on the PACs' registrations when Sen. Wahls submitted his resignation.

"7. In 2024, The Next 50 Network received \$100,000 from Third Way, one hundred times the expressed limit of the "one thousand dollar" expenditure outlined in section 6 of the ethics rules for the Iowa Senate regarding the definition of a political action committee."

First, \$100,000 from Third Way would be a *contribution to* The Next 50 Network LLC, not an expenditure. The Complainant fails to read the rest of the rule. The contribution must be received to expressly advocate for the nomination, election, or defeat of a candidate for public office. See Code of Ethics sec. 6. The candidate for "public office" must be running in an Iowa state election. The Complaint

makes no showing that Next 50 Network LLC did anything to support or oppose a candidate for state election while Sen. Wahls was Executive Director because Next 50 Network LLC did no such thing.

“8. Next 50 Action reported that it had provided communications and logistical support and assisted in research and vetting for the Next 50 PAC.”

Sen. Wahls has demonstrated that he was not an employee of Next 50 Action or the Next 50 PAC. What two related political organizations do internally to assist one another is wholly irrelevant to the Senate Code of Ethics.

“9. Senator Wahls was the author of ‘The Next 50’s Impact Report.’”

It should be no surprise that the Executive Director of an organization co-authored, with the Board Chair, a report on the organization’s work. Nothing the Complaint cites suggests that Sen. Wahls was reporting on political activity in Iowa. The authors note the Complaint cites primarily focuses on federal races and only in passing generically refers to state legislative races.

“10. Per the report he authored, Senator Zach Wahls used his role as the leader of The Next 50 to influence election across the country, including in Iowa.”

Again, the Complaint fails to cite any Iowa candidate or race that the Next 50 supported while Sen. Wahls was Executive Director. Without knowing what Sen. Wahls may or may not have done to influence any election in Iowa, it is impossible to see how Sen. Wahls co-authoring an “Impact Report” is evidence of an Ethics violation. It is evidence of an Executive Director doing his job.

The Proposed Remedies

The remedies requested in the Complaint are absurd and expose the true political motivations driving it. If there were an ethics violation resulting from Sen. Wahls’s employment with Next 50 Network LLC, the appropriate remedy would be for Sen. Wahls to resign from that position. But since he has not worked for Next 50 Network LLC for over a year, the Complaint wants Sen. Wahls to 1) repay a salary; 2) be formally censured; and 3) be stripped of his committee assignments. First, it is not clear that the Ethics Committee has the authority to order a senator to repay a salary from a private employer let alone the statutory salaries senators receive for their service. Second, the senate is not scheduled to meet again this year. Sen. Wahls will no longer be a member of the body when a formal censure vote could be taken. Likewise, he does not serve on any committees expected to meet before the next General Assembly gavel to order without him.

Conclusion

Senator Wahls did not violate Senate Code of Ethics section 6. Prior to accepting the role as Executive Director of the Next 50 Network LLC, Sen. Wahls conferred with the Secretary of the Senate to get guidance from regarding this employment opportunity. Only after Secretary Smithson provided Sen. Wahls written guidance did he accept the position.

Senator Wahls took another step to ensure that he did not violate the Senate’s Code of Ethics. He insisted that the Next 50 Network LLC and its subsidiary political organizations not engage in any political

activity – no endorsements, no contributions, no research, no communications, no GOTV – for any candidate in Iowa while he was Executive Director.

The Complaint makes no showing that Sen. Wahls employer engaged in any political activity involving candidates for public office – candidates for Iowa state, county, city, or school office – while Sen. Wahls was Executive Director. At most, they’ve identified an *ex officio* officer role on a subsidiary 501(c)(4) that had no activity in Iowa other than a mailing address for ActBlue to send its bills. This is not a violation of the Senate’s Code of Ethics. It is nothing more than an attempt to paint a political smear with a broad brush without bothering to understand the ethics rules. Sen. Wahls understood those rules and took every step to stay on the right side of the line.

Senator Wahls respectfully requests that the Ethics Committee dismiss the Complaint as unfounded and unreasoned. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Matthew L. Gannon
Matthew L. Gannon