

'Uproar' in Old Bridge over GOP town council primary

Republicans divided over county chairman's decision to tinker with local council slate...

By Chase Brush | 05/20/15



OLD BRIDGE — Sam Thompson's got something of a mess on his hands in Old Bridge, where Republicans are fuming over his decision to tinker with the make-up of the local council ticket despite near-unanimous support for the candidate to whom he chose to refuse the party line.

The Southern twang-speaking state senator, who's served as chairman of the Middlesex County Republicans since 2010, has been on the receiving end of a barrage of criticism these last few weeks after he opted to remove incumbent Councilwoman-at-large Debbie Walker's name from the organization's ticket and in her place add Councilman-at-large Brian Cahill's — despite Walker receiving a vast majority of the votes, and Cahill receiving the fewest, during the county committee's screening last month.

The move has sparked a contentious primary race in the conservative stronghold town ahead of a June 2 election, pitting Cahill and incumbent Councilman-at-Large James Anderson against Walker, also the council's current president, and newcomer candidate Anita Greenberg.

"The party is in an uproar," said Greenberg, who called Thompson's decision, among other things, "disturbing" and "foolish."

It's a chaotic situation, and one driven, local pols say, by the absence of a clear explanation from Thompson regarding his decision. Even in New Jersey, where powerful county machines play an out-sized role in awarding which candidates get the party line in up and down ballot races, political observers say it's a rare occurrence for a lone chairman to intervene in the outcome of a routine committee screening, a process whereby representatives from individual town wards and districts come together to nominate their chosen candidates.

In particular, that's true when it comes to the creation of local tickets, where the political right to home-rule is respected and, in many cases, encouraged.

But the normal protocol was aborted by Thompson after the committee's screening yielded a ticket that did not include Cahill's name. Three council seats are up for grabs in Old Bridge this year, and at the party's meeting on March 24, Walker received the most support, garnering 55 out of 56 of the votes. She was followed by Anderson, garnering 50 votes, who was followed by Greenberg, a former Old Bridge Republican chair, garnering 45 votes. Cahill, who's served on the council for some eight-odd years, received only 18.

Those present in the room that day described a feeling of anxiety following the screening, fueled by Thompson's apparent unease about the nominations. They said he did not immediately announce his intent to tweak the ticket, but instead said he had "options" and would decide at a later date how to proceed. On March 30, Thompson informed the party that he would overturn the committee's nominations, switching Walker with Cahill. And at a contentious follow-up meeting on April 2, where he was met with protests and petitions, he defended the move as an attempt to put together the "strongest possible ticket" and falling within his authority as county chair.

"We're very disappointed in his actions," said Art Haney, current chair of the Old Bridge Republicans. "We have not seen this happen in at least 20 years or more, and even then generally it's reserved for county races or county chairman races, things like that, or when there's some significant reason why a Republican should not be on the county ballot. And that would have to be really significant."

The move has outraged in particular Walker and Greenberg, who are now campaigning alongside one another and working to "educate" voters about the controversy ahead of the June 2 primary. Walker, who has worked for such statewide GOP figures as Scott Sippelle during his 2010 congressional run and state Senator Joe Kyrillos during his 2012 U.S. Senate run, described being taken off the ticket as a personal "injustice", and called Thompson's decision to go against the will of committee members "un-American."

"There was no reason. You're talking about an incumbent and a sitting council president, who got the most votes, and you replace her with someone who got the least votes," Greenberg said. "No one can even grasp it."

She also scoffed at the chairman's suggestion that Cahill was the stronger candidate, noting the relative depth of support she received at the screening. If Thompson wanted to replace Cahill with the weakest link, she added, he should have removed Anderson's name, who was the lowest vote-getter at the screening next to Cahill himself.

"I could see if it was close, or if I did something wrong, but it was such a large margin of victory that you cannot justify it," Walker, whose husband is the chief of the local Cheesquake Fire Department, said. "I don't care if he says Brian was the stronger candidate — if he was stronger, why'd he only get 18 votes? And if he's that strong, why couldn't he run off the line and win the primary?"

"I just think it's disrespectful what he did to me," she added.



From left to right: Anderson, Thompson, Mayor Own Henry, Walker, and Cahill (Old Bridge Republicans/Facebook).

Greenberg agreed. The town's previous chair who elected to step down last year to run for the council seat, she also said Thompson still hasn't given an adequate explanation of his decision, arguing that there was "truly no justification for it, other than that he could." She noted that such a decision, though legal, has "never happened" in her 20-year career with the party in Old Bridge, and said it is "very, very unfortunate that it has come to this point, because it's not good for the party."

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She also slammed Cahill for not taking the gentleman's route and showing himself out the door.

"Shame on Brian Cahill. If I had gotten 18 votes, that night as a councilman for 8 years I would've said, than you all very much for your past support of me, I see my time has come to an end, and went away graciously," she said. "That he didn't I think says a lot."

More ominously, both Walker and Greenberg — who said the ticket lost a "dynamic worker" with a "strong base" in Walker — suggested that Thompson's decision has a "ring of gender bias" to it. While Greenberg's name will run under the Middlesex County Republican Organization line, Walker's will run under the Old Bridge Republicans moniker, "so now it feels like people have to choose," Greenberg said.

"So it's actually saying you'll allow one female, pick which one you want," she said.

But Thompson himself sees the whole thing differently. With the party facing a general election in November, when county freeholders, mayors, and Assemblypeople will also find themselves on the ballot, it's responsibility is to put together the "strongest ticket." He said that committee members, who based their nomination of Walker on "friendship," have a "mistaken idea" about the screening process, and think that "when they vote there as a committee, they're picking

people to go on the organization's line and give them the slogan and what not. They do not," he stressed.

"There were four people filing petitions. All four of them requested the use of a slogan which is incorporated. You know, the owner of the slogan gets to decide who gets it," he said. "Now I gave the slogan to Cahill and Anderson and to Greenberg. Therefore, Walker did not have the slogan."

Thompson admitted that the situation is a rare one, but warranted. Under a state statute called Title 19, county chairman are given the authority to approve or reject candidate nominations to run with the county organization. In this case, he simply exercised that authority in making a decision he felt would benefit the party in the longterm.

"Just because a town decides they want to have trick people or whatever, well I have to consider the whole ticket," he said. "Council, freeholder, mayor — what will be the strongest ticket overall. That's my assessment, that's my responsibility. It's not anything personal."

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Moreover, Cahill has proved himself one of the top vote-getters on the council over the last eight years, Thompson said, being the only Republican to garner more votes than the town's mayoral candidate back in 2008.

Walker.

"To me, a guy who wins a general election ticket and is this strongest guy on the general election ticket, that's the strongest person on the ballot. So I was not going to dump him off," Thompson said.

And, "quite frankly," Thompson said, "the other candidates didn't want to run with" Walker.

"If the candidates all wanted to run together, they were at liberty to use any slogan they chose and all run together," he said. "Debbie chose to use the slogan Old Bridge Republicans. The other candidates chose to use the other slogan, the one that I own."

Which, in a way, is a good point. Though Greenberg and Walker contend they are campaigning together against Anderson and Cahill despite Thompson's decision, and while the Old Bridge GOP has vowed to support the candidate's elected during the committee screening, Walker is still running on a ticket alone. Greenberg, that is, has not opted to give up the privilege of running on the county's line, which, in a primary election with low voter turnout, could be a huge advantage.

Greenberg, for her part, said that "unfortunately nothing can be done" about it at this point, but argued Thompson's decision "really hindered the party and divided the party." If the intent was head into November with as strong a team as possible, she said, fracturing the party with an unnecessary primary wasn't the way to go about it.

"You would think that for someone who has been in politics as long as he has, he would have know," Greenberg said, adding she was "very surprised" someone in the "political twilight of their career" would take such action. "Say Debbie Walker, God forbid, loses, and Brian Cahill wins in the June 2 primary. Does he think the 55 county committee people that he just ignored are going to work for the party in the fall? And it's all about winning in the fall against the Democrats."

“Actually, if he had let Brian off the line, he would have had one person upset. Now he’s got the whole party upset,” she added.

Greenberg also said that the move is reflective of a larger problem with politics in Garden State, as it reinforces a fear among voters and political observers of too-powerful county machines whose unaccountable chairs operate with unbridled autonomy when choosing which candidates will be awarded the highly-coveted party line.

“It’s very disheartening when the county gets involved with local government. It puts you in a position as a chair, and I was the chair for eight years, that what is our value?,” Greenberg asked. “What is the value of the county committee that you have a relationship with them, and then you ask them to work for you, and then their voice and their vote is totally ignored?”

“Actually, it should frighten every other chair in the county,” Greenberg said, adding that she and Walker received an influx of phone calls and inquiries from other county chairs and state officials after the screening.

Ultimately, Haney said that while it’s “unfortunate” the party now must face a contentious primary — he said the race has seen attack mailers issued from the Cahill/Anderson camp — support for Walker and Greenberg has been “galvanized.” Two two have the full support of the county committee, he said, which he hopes will carry both to victory on June 2.

Walker, for her part, just hopes it doesn’t happen again.

“It has to stop because I don’t think it’s right what he did,” she said. “And I don’t want it to happen to someone else.”