Montclair Township Council running together for reelection

Photo courtesy of montclair 2016

The Montclair 2016 slate, from left, At-Large Councilmember Rich McMahon, 2nd Ward Councilmember Robin Schlager, 3rd Ward Councilmember Sean Spiller, 1st Ward Councilmember William Hurlock, Mayor Robert Jackson, 4th Ward Councilmember Renée Baskerville, and Deputy Mayor Bob Russo.

The wait is over.

After a long buildup of "maybes," "we-thinks" and "that depends," the seven Township Council incumbents have announced that they are seeking reelection in one slate, named "Montclair 2016."

Since January, when Mayor Robert Jackson and Deputy Mayor Bob Russo announced that they were considering new four-year terms, a release that they and their five colleagues would be running has come in fits and starts.

However, through the past several weeks the council members have been meeting to discuss the formation of their slate.

"I don't know if there was a lot of back and forth," said 1st Ward councilmember William Hurlock about the meetings. "I think many of us were waiting to see what the landscape was going to look like."

Hurlock noted that in past election cycles, slates had formed as early as August, and that this time around he and his colleagues were curious to see what opposition they might have faced.

In fact, only 3rd Ward Councilmember Sean Spiller is facing a contender. Deputy Municipal Clerk Juliette Lee confirmed that Maureen Edelson has turned in the necessary number of signatures to challenge Spiller for the 3rd Ward seat.

Jackson takes the paucity of opposition as a good sign. "One would seem to think the public thinks we've done a good job, and I'm happy with that," he said.

"I will still walk door to door. Even if you're unopposed, you have to make your case to the people. You can't take that for granted."

As Spiller put it: "The end-game of this thing is not an election, 'Did you win an election, did you not win an election?' At the end of the day, it's about service."

Regarding where that service will focus, all seven have their ideas, with some overlap. For Jackson, another term will be marked by the balance of relieving the tax burden put on residents, and keeping the commercial development necessary to maximize other sources of revenue.

"I am 'pro' downtown enhancement," said Jackson. "If someone wants to talk about capitalizing assets we have here in town, I'm 'pro' that, and finding ways to help our taxpayer not be susceptible to continued tax increases ... One thing I'm not in favor of is when growth or density spills over into less dense areas."

Likewise, it's important to Baskerville that she ensure certain residents aren't priced out of town as Montclair is developed, and not only by tax increases. "First and foremost, we need more affordable housing. I don't necessarily mean the legal term, with specifications for income. I mean affordable so that middle-America ... can remain in Montclair and we don't become the township of affluence. I think that may be where we are threatened most at this time."

Russo agreed, but added a personal twist. "I want to make sure this town maintains its affordability for seniors. People over 50 have to look elsewhere to live if taxes get too high, and I want to make sure I work for them."

Russo proclaimed that he will fight to maintain the quality of public education. "The problem is the state does not give us fair funding," he maintained. "That's why our taxes are so high."

Hurlock told The Montclair Times that he intends to work on the township's infrastructure, guaranteeing that it can sustain Montclair's continued growth. "My bailiwick, or three primary areas, would be finances, education and infrastructure, and not necessarily in that order ... I want the town to work closely with whatever businesses want to make Montclair their home to resolve parking issues, or traffic issues, lighting - things that municipalities are traditionally charged with. I would like to see our town government be responsive, and work with businesses on a whole host of issues going forward."

According to Spiller, finances are the key. "I'm very proud of the debt reduction. I think it's allowed us to do so many things without increasing costs to residents and taxpayers."

According to Spiller, by keeping debt service down, the township will have more funds to invest in infrastructure. As he put it, "Doing more roads than have ever been done, committing to support various groups in town, whether it be the funding we've increased to pre-K, the funding we've increased to the library, the funding we've increased to senior citizens, the animal shelter and to community policing."

The last of which touched on a major focus of Councilmember-At-Large Rich MacMahon, who is also vice president of the Montclair Ambulance Unit.

"The triad of public safety, ambulance, fire and police, in the last four years they've really come together to work more cohesively," said McMahon. "They're really doing a good job in synchronicity with each other. In some places,

like New York, they're competitive with each other. That never seems to be the case here in Montclair. We've been working on improving the [municipal] Office of Emergency Management. I'm looking forward to continuing with that."

McMahon noted that he is in favor of constructing a new police headquarters and municipal complex at Lackawanna Plaza, which Baskerville cited as an opportunity to create community centers, such as one for teenagers, and one for senior citizens.

Schlager said she hopes to continue her campaigns for pedestrian and driver safety, as well as maximize the availability of recycling bins in public spaces.

She noted that, although practically speaking, she will be campaigning for reelection in the 2nd Ward, she has to remain mindful of how her decisions as a councilmember can cross ward boundaries.

"Even though we have over 39,000 people, it is a relatively small town." Schlager said. "The borders to the wards are really close, and sometimes make no sense. Like Gordonhurst Avenue, where one side is in the 2nd Ward, and the other is in the 1st. I'm always knowledgeable of how things I vote on can affect someone on the other side of the street."

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