

Montclair Township Council incumbents consider running together in May election



staff photo by adam anik

The Township Council, left to right: 1st Ward councilmember William Hurlock, 3rd Ward councilmember Sean Spiller, Mayor Robert Jackson, 4th Ward councilmember Renée Baskerville, and Deputy Mayor Bob Russo (councilmember-at-large Rich McMahon, and 2nd Ward councilmember Robin Schlager are not pictured).

Inside

Activist running for

at-large council spot

A3

All seven Township Council members have met to discuss forming a unified slate.

While it seems all but certain to happen, the incumbents are still reserving the announcement until every variable is locked in place.

So far, only 1st Ward councilmember William Hurlock, 4th Ward councilmember Renée Baskerville, and Mayor Robert Jackson have turned in their campaign petitions, according to Deputy Municipal Clerk Juliette Lee.

Furthermore, Lee said, only Hurlock's has been officially verified as having a sufficient number of valid signatures.

"It's still somewhat up in the air," said Jackson of a slate, "but we have had discussions. Good discussions, but I would still say nothing's been signed in blood just yet."

Hurlock also confirmed that the discussions took place, but that nobody has made a definitive commitment. "I don't think it's necessarily that there's a holdout as much as I don't think we're at that point yet to say we're all coming in as a slate. We're still kind of in preliminary discussions. I think it's too early yet."

"I'm hopeful that we'll be able to run together," said Baskerville, who successfully ran as an independent candidate in the last two elections. "It looks as though most of us are leaning toward wanting to do that, or at least feeling that there's enough reason for us to stay together for continuity."

As for why she's changed her tune on campaigning with a group, Baskerville explained it's a matter of solidifying votes among her colleagues.

"What I learned the last time was that you have to have four votes," said Baskerville, referring to the four council votes necessary to pass any given policy.

"When I ran independently, for the [term's] beginning month, it put me at a disadvantage because it was almost as though I was disrespecting a slate, even though I wasn't," Baskerville observed.

"So much of coming together, and getting to know one another, and [discovering] who has strengths in what area happens during the campaign ... I missed out on that last time."

Jackson said the conclaves were simply held to beg the question of whether or not to form a slate, but no further aspects of a group ticket were considered, such as a slate name or platforms.

"I don't believe that incumbents have much of a platform," said Jackson. "What you run on is your record. You have an evaluation, if you will ... and the public either hires you or fires you. Incumbents can't promise a great deal because the public will look and say, 'Well, that sounds good, but you didn't do that, or you did that during your first four years. Why should I think you're any different?'"

As 3rd Ward councilmember Sean Spiller put it, this marks an acknowledgement among his colleagues that they've made strides as a team.

"Having seen this group work together for the last four years, I'm just happy that everybody recognized each other's work ethic, recognized the success that we've had," Spiller noted. "You don't run with everybody unless you feel that good things have been happening."

According to Jackson, collective runs typically have a manager overseeing the campaign, but an individual candidate may keep a manager dedicated to her or his own campaign.

"You're going to do brochures, you're going to do ads. You're going to have some fixed costs that are pretty much the same whether you're running independently or you're running as a slate," said Jackson. "The more the merrier, in terms of spreading those fixed costs around. That's a big help."

He added, "I find that the camaraderie of running on a slate makes it more fun."

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