

Montclair may see an incumbent slate in 2016 municipal election



staff photo by Nicholas katzban

Five of the seven Township Councilmembers pick up campaign packets from Municipal Clerk Linda Wanat, left, in her office this past Monday morning. Fourth Ward Councilmember Renée Baskerville and First Ward Councilmember William Hurlock had already obtained packets.

As of Monday, Jan. 25, all seven incumbents have pulled campaign packets for the 2016 Township Council race.

An eerily quiet election landscape was broken during last week's council meeting when Mayor Robert Jackson and Deputy Mayor Bob Russo announced that they would consider running again. Comments from other councilmembers about their own intentions had ranged from cagey to quixotic.

However, by the time Jackson and Russo made their announcements, 4th Ward Councilmember Renée Baskerville had already pulled packets for mayor, at-large councilmember, and her current ward seat.

"Mayor Jackson was going to tell us Labor Day, and he didn't. [He said] that he was still talking to his family and trying to make up his mind," Baskerville told The Montclair Times. "Finally, on Martin Luther King's birthday, I thought, 'What better way to celebrate one of our greatest leaders ... than to commit myself to continuing my service in the community?' I just went in and pulled, and I didn't know the mayor was running, and I didn't know Russo was

running."

She added, "I just didn't know at the time, and I'm not a last-second type of person."

Baskerville said she supports Jackson for a second mayoral term, and that her preference would be to continue as the 4th Ward councilmember. She noted that she would join a Jackson-led slate if one was to form.

On Friday, Jan. 22, 1st Ward Councilmember William Hurlock had pulled a packet for his current position. Speaking to The Montclair Times just after visiting the Municipal Clerk's Office, Hurlock said he still hadn't heard any talk about a slate forming, but would begin to put together a campaign team and seek the signatures necessary for gaining a spot on the ballot.

Then, emerging after this past weekend's torrential snowstorm, Jackson, Russo, Councilmember-At-Large Rich McMahon, 2nd Ward Councilmember Robin Schlager, and 3rd Ward Councilmember Sean Spiller took a break from a meeting about snow removal to walk down to the Municipal Clerk's Office as a group, and pulled packets for their respective incumbent seats.

With his tongue pressed stiffly into his cheek, Jackson told reporters that he was, "still firmly on the fence," about seeking reelection.

When asked whether requesting packets as a group indicated the formation of a slate, Russo said, "Slates are later on. When this is all submitted [after] March 7th, the slates form."

Spiller said, "I think we've got a great group here. I'm excited about what we've done, and I'm excited about what we could do. I certainly want the opportunity for all of us to do this again."

Four years ago, Jackson had assembled a slate that included Russo, McMahon, Spiller, and Schlager. An incumbent councilmember, Baskerville ran for reelection as an independent. Hurlock had been a member of a council slate assembled by mayoral candidate Harvey Susswein.

Hurlock had previously told The Times: "There has been no definitive talk about slates," and added, "There's a lot of variables. It's up to [the other six incumbents]."

Yet, there has been some talk about platforms.

"I'm hoping that this will be an unusual election, in that we have a proven group," said McMahon. "I don't know if we're going to be completely intact, and I think we've done a lot of good work for Montclair in the last three-and-a-half years. Record and experience has to be a big factor."

In earlier comments to The Times, Jackson said, "I think fiscal concerns are going to be important. Maintaining the tenor and decorum of the council will be important to people. Thank God there hasn't been a lot of brouhaha. From when I talk to people, that's been very important.

"We're going to continue to work on our financials, and continue to stabilize taxes, and make investment in our infrastructure."

Russo summed up his platforms with two words: "Education and seniors."

The deputy mayor also reiterated his thoughts on the importance of reelecting a full council and mayor for the first time since Montclair adopted its current model of government in 1980, noting it would provide residents with much-needed stability.

"This council has made progress for Montclair. That's the key," Russo said, "a united front for progress."

"That sounds like the basis of a good slogan," said Schlager, perhaps only half-joking.

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