

POLITIFAX™

A Weekly Electronic Newsletter on Politics in **NEW JERSEY**

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Passaic County: The Tipping Point II

Who's Hot

Donald Trump

We know. We know. All politics is local. But the President is the newest shiny object, and sometimes it appears that half of what goes on in the state is about him: Will the Governor take a job in the Administration? Who will and will not honor the Muslim ban that is not a Muslim ban? We'll have more to say about the latter next week. (We'll continue to ignore the former. All the speculation is just exhausting: Trump rejected him. Trump called him to DC on Tuesday to offer him a White House job.) For now, though, it's sufficient to remark on how easily distracted we can get from the local business at hand.

Quote of the Week

One of our wags solved the riddle of why the polls show support for President Trump's agenda, while his favorables are upside down: *"It's simple. A majority of people like what he's trying to do but don't like him or his style."*

THE PREFACE. Bill Pascrell's 1996 Congressional victory didn't just happen. When he was elected Paterson Mayor in 1990, he did so without the support of John Girgenti, who took the Senate seat in his district when Frank Graves died. Pascrell solidified his position by getting John Currie elected County Chairman (over Girgenti's wife Rose!) in 1991, by getting reelected to the Assembly in 1991 and 1993 and as Mayor in 1994, and by electing ally Al Steele to the second Assembly seat in 1995 after a brief Republican interregnum. Only then was the stage set for 1996.

THE FULCRUM. In early October, Bill Martini's campaign aired a radio ad hinting that Pascrell was the subject of a federal investigation. Billy Pascrell, his father's campaign manager, procured a letter from the U.S. Attorney's office saying no such investigation existed. The candidate went into the final debate armed with this missive but waited until closing statements, when he declared his displeasure with the ad and read the letter on the air. After that, neither the candidate nor the campaign ever looked back on the way to a 51-48 (6,200-vote) victory. Pascrell lost 16 of the 21 towns, but his margin in Paterson was enough to carry the day.

THE AFTERMATH. Congressional campaigns in New Jersey don't usually affect county politics. More often than not they are the tail and not the dog. But Pascrell's coattails were strong enough to carry two Freeholders into office with him, even though they were outspent two and a half to one. The last Democrat on the Board had lost in 1992, so Pascrell's runningmates broke a GOP 7-0 shutout. In 1997, the Democrats took a 5-4 majority, their first majority in more than a decade. The following year, despite an impressive 62-35 Pascrell reelection, the GOP, bolstered by Ed Englehardt's reelection romp as Sheriff, took two seats to regain the majority. But the Democrats chipped away at that majority until, in 2001, they held all seven seats. It didn't hurt that Englehardt, the subject of a federal investigation, decided not to seek reelection that year. The Democrats -- with help from favorable demographic shifts and the conviction on corruption charges of Republican Chairman Peter Murphy and County Administrator Nick DiDonna in 2001 -- have maintained their shutout to this day.

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Around the State

Atlantic

WRONG? There's no better example of the difference between Democrats and Republicans than the recent Taj Mahal saga. After a bitter strike by Local 54 of Unite-HERE over pensions and health benefits, Carl Icahn shut the casino's doors and abandon plans to invest the \$100 to \$200 million in the property. Then, the Legislature passed a bill that singled out Icahn and took away his casino license for five years in what the Democrats said was a prophylactic move to prevent casino license warehousing. Of course, he could get his license back if he settles with the union. The Governor vetoed the bill, calling it "a transparent attempt to punish [Icahn] for making the business decision to close its doors after its union employees went on strike and refused to negotiate in good faith."

The Election Watch

GOVERNOR GOP. As we said last week, polls this far out aren't about much more than name recognition. The latest Fairleigh Dickinson PublicMind survey proves the point. Kim Guadagno led the Republicans with 18 percent. The runner up was "Someone Else" with 13 percent. Joe Piscopo was next, with 12, and we're certain that every respondent who preferred the comic is thoroughly familiar with his programs to fix the pension and benefits crisis and the school funding formula. Jack Ciattarelli and Nutley Commissioner Steve Rogers each had 2 percent. But the real winner was undecided, which took 52 percent.

Ciattarelli will be on the Chamber train, but Guadagno will have to stay behind since the Governor is going to DC. If both of them were out of the state at

the same time, Steve Sweeney would become Acting Governor, and who knows what bills he'd sign and what havoc he'd wreck on the Administration's agenda. (Embarrassingly, that happened once back in 2010.)

GOVERNOR DEM. The results on the Democratic side were similar. Phil Murphy tied with "Someone Else" at 17 percent. Ray Lesniak had 7 percent, John Wisniewski 6 percent, and Jim Johnson 2 percent. And once again, those who didn't know who they would vote for led all the rest -- with exactly 50 percent.

Wisniewski picked up the support of the Princeton Community Democratic Organization. The League of Conservation Voters and Levi Sanders (Bernie's son) endorsed Murphy. Ray Lesniak got a half hour with Michael Aron on *On the Record* to explain his unorthodox campaign. Jim Johnson asked Murphy to limit his spending to \$15 million. (There we wrote it with a straight face.) And, according to Dustin Racioppi at *The Record*, Bill Brennan has been raising money without filing the paperwork to make that legal.

LD 2. Chris Brown's Assembly runningmates are Margate Commissioner Brenda Tabbe and Brigantine Councilman Vince Sera. Freeholder Ernie Coursey and attorney Colin Bell are the early favorites on the Democratic side, but former Freeholder Jim Carney and Buena Vista Committeeman John Armato are also looking to run with Vince Mazzeo. Brown leads Mazzeo in fundraising \$171,000 to \$33,000, but our guess is that General Majority PAC, the South Jersey Democrats' funding vehicle, will weigh in heavily.

LD 19. The Democrats picked Puerto Rican Association for Human Development Executive Director Yvette Lopez to run for the seat John Wisniewski will vacate. She has the unanimous support of the district's leadership, including Wilda Diaz, even though the Perth Amboy Mayor's relations with the county Democrats has been less than cozy of late. We suppose she's inclined to be cooperative since the party decided not to waste resources going after her.

LD 24. Nathan Orr, who lost an Assembly primary in 2015, and David Atwood of Sparta will challenge Parker Space and Hal Wirths in the Republican primary. The main theme of their announcement was that they oppose the gas tax increase.



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LD 29. The Democrats tapped Sheriff's Officer Shanique Speight for the Assembly seat that belonged to Grace Spencer, who became a judge, and Blonnie Watson, who declined to run for a full term. Speight, ran a day care center that the city closed for unsafe conditions days before she was named as the candidate. (The center also owes \$33,000 in back rent and water bills.) You'll recall that Speight was Cory Booker's pick to fill Donald Payne's Council seat when he moved to Congress in 2012. A near-riot in the Council chambers ended that plan, and the seat wasn't filled until a special election in November 2013.

LD 39. Gerry Cardinale has a primary. Former Cresskill Councilman John McCann will take on the 37-year Senate veteran. Bob Auth and Holly Schepisi won't have opposition, though.

LD 40. Passaic GOP Chairman John Traier, who backs Paul DiGaetano, came up short in a 14-6 executive committee vote in his effort to oust party treasurer Brendan Murphy, who along with his father former Chairman Peter supports Kristin Corrado.

Passaic County, continued

THE LEGACY. Republicans around the state often talk about the cadre of operatives who came out of the Bob Franks School of Politics. Less often noted is the group -- almost all of whom are still around as consul-

tants, party officials, lobbyists, operatives, and even electeds -- who worked on the 1996 Pascrell campaign: Billy Pascrell, John Currie, Ed Farmer, Dave Fillipelli, Brendan Gill, Bill Maer, Joe Orlando, Nellie Pou, Al Spivey, and Joe Waks. Perhaps they, at least as much as the seismic shift in Passaic County's politics, are the most lasting result of that 1996 campaign.

THE STORIES. Talk to anybody who worked on that 1996 campaign, and they'll describe it as pivotal in their lives and Pascrell as somewhere between a mentor and a father figure with a remarkable ability to evaluate political talent. If nothing else, the campaign provided them with stories they love to tell. All of them remember being the beneficiary of "Bill's Arm of Steel," his extended right arm saving the staffer in the car next to him as the candidate periodically hit the brakes as he attacked the road from behind the wheel. Then, there's the time a member of Bill Clinton's Cabinet came to the district to campaign for Pascrell. Pascrell thought the event was supposed to be at Great Falls so he had the park scrubbed to perfection. His mood when he learned that the actual location was Little Falls can only be imagined. And on election night, after Paterson's results came in and changed what had been looking like a close loss into a win, the troops ended up in a bar playing shuffleboard, at which Pascrell was as hell bent on winning as he had been the Congressional seat.

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News Roundup

Tidbits

Dumbest Lawsuit of the Week: Wawa is suing Mike Han, the owner of a Paterson convenience store-pizzeria-fried chicken place called DaWA, which means “Everyone is welcome.” The chain says it has repeatedly asked Han to change the name. He has refused, so the company went to court to prevent confusion to its customers and some perceived damage to its trademark. Just for the record, the nearest Wawa to DaWA is three miles away in Garfield.

Worst Decision of the Week: Among the 22 municipalities that have declined a state grant to buy body cameras for their police departments are six in Passaic County. Paterson and Passaic City are the biggest of them. Paterson police Director Jerry Speziale says the city can’t afford to store the tapes the cameras would produce.

Bad Joke of the Week: How many times do we have to repeat Edmund Kean’s deathbed admonition that “dying is easy; comedy is hard?” Keyport Police Chief George Casaletto obviously hasn’t been paying attention. When he decided to participate in Fire Chief Eugene Eng’s retirement party, he dressed up as a Chinese takeout container with huge eyeglasses and a traditional Chinese queue and told Chinese jokes. Asian-American groups weren’t amused.

Question of the Week: Has anyone out there ever actually seen the School Funding Formula? Where do they keep it? On a blackboard in the Education Department? In a safe in a bank somewhere? How long is it? We know. That’s more than one question.

Most Repulsive News of the Week: Folks in Cinnaminson found Ku Klux Klan fliers that looked like Valentine greetings, on their doorsteps. The racist, homophobic message came covered by a heart that said “Love your own race.”

Anticipation of the Week: For the past few years the Walk to Washington has had 13 Amtrak cars. This year, the response has been such that the Chamber of Commerce train ride will have 15 cars. See you on the train.

Winners and Losers

Winner: Ed Salmon

The former BPU President was elected to a 16th consecutive term as president of the Commissioners Emeritus of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners.

Winner: WBGO

It isn’t often you can capture a half century of history by getting four guys together to chat, but that’s what *NJTV*’s Michael Hill did by gathering Ken Gibson, Sharpe James, Cory Booker, and Ras Baraka, Newark’s mayors for the past 47 years, at the public radio station to talk about the city they led. You can watch it on njtvonline.org.

Winner: Backyard Tomato Growers

We’re not talking about those durable, transportable fruits that pass as the real thing. The Rutgers Agricultural Experiment Station in Cumberland County has been experimenting in an effort to reproduce the flavor and fruitiness we remember from our youth. They’ve succeeded: The seeds for the Rutgers 250 went on sale last year and will be available this year in greater quantity.

Winner: St. John the Apostle’s CYO Basketball Team

When told, with only two games remaining in their season, that Newark Archdiocesan rules made the two girls on their team ineligible to play, the nine boys on the Clark fifth grade team voted to end their season rather than play without their two longtime female teammates. Their game against St. Bartholomew the Apostle was cancelled as well. Then, the two girls on the team reciprocated and encouraged the boys to play the final game. Unfortunately that game had already been cancelled. The parents of the players appealed to Cardinal Tobin, telling his Eminence that the ball is in his court.

Loser: Juan Griles

The Paterson Eastside High coach was suspended after the revelation that five of his players from foreign countries listed his condo as their home.