

Lower Republicans accuse Neville of stealing display board

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — According to a news release, the Lower Township Regular Republican Organization is questioning whether Lower Township Councilman James Neville, an independent, may have “walked off” with a display board depicting outfall pipes in his ward from the Lower Township Municipal Utilities Authority (MUA) following its Oct. 1 meeting.

Surveillance video footage of the lobby of the MUA building following the Oct. 1 meeting was obtained through an Open Public Records Act (OPRA) request.

Neville is seen carrying a poster board. According to the release, the poster board displayed a recently completed outfall pipe survey.

According to Lower Township Mayor Michael Beck, the OPRA request was filed by “Republican organization operatives.”

As part of the OPRA request, a letter was obtained

from MUA Solicitor Jeffrey Barnes to Lower Township Solicitor Ronald Gelzun in which Barnes alerts Gelzun of taking of MUA property by Neville and recites a state official misconduct statute. A complaint was filed with Lower Township police, according to the release.

The video clip of Neville has been posted on the Facebook page “Conrad, Perry & Simonsen for Council.” Neville said he could not comment on the press release since he has retained an attorney.

Beck said Neville’s only crime was to try to help his neighborhood.

“He borrowed a map that had to do with water situations in his neighborhood,” Beck said.

He said the intellectual components of that map were developed by a contract the township had with an engineering firm, so the township owns the information.

“So what you’re really talking about is a poster board worth a couple dollars,” Beck said, adding that Neville re-

turned the poster board 36 hours later to the MUA after he had studied the chart.

“What has now occurred has been nothing short of the creation of a banana republic,” Beck said. “What you’re doing is using ratepayer money to steer an election.”

He said if anyone at the MUA had an ounce of common sense, they would have said “Give him a call and tell him to bring the map back when he’s done with it.”

“Instead you have the Republican organization, which

is embedded up to its eyeballs inside the MUA, has orchestrated an attempt to embarrass and to smear a guy whose only crime was trying to help his neighborhood,” Beck said.

He said Republican organization leadership has tried to make Neville “look like he has done the Brinks robbery, so they can steer the upcoming election.” The video has the title of “It Takes a Thief.”

Beck said as a democracy, government stays out of elections but not the Lower Township MUA.

Election

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Simonsen lost his bid for mayor in that same election, with incumbent Michael Beck being returned to office by the township’s voters. Beck has called the MUA takeover proposal the “Super Bowl” of local politics, citing the potential savings that would be garnered by the elimination of duplicative administration positions.

The mayor, a retired Philadelphia police officer, has also led the charge for the police station to be moved back to the Municipal Complex in the Villas. He has been supported by Deputy Mayor Norris Clark, who was elected in 2012 on the Independents for Lower ticket with Beck, and Neville.

The lines have been drawn pretty clearly.

“The MUA thing is dead,” said Simonsen, “or it should be. It doesn’t have the support

required. I’m hopeful it won’t come around again.”

The MUA takeover bid officially failed three weeks ago, when the five-member council voted by a 3-2 to support the move.

Because one of the ordinances required for the takeover involved the assumption of the MUA bonded debt, a supermajority — four of five votes — was necessary for it to pass. Simonsen and Conrad cast the votes last week against the takeover, bringing that process to a full stop.

“I don’t have confidence in (township manager) Mike Voll’s ability to run an MUA, and don’t want to jeopardize the services our ratepayers receive and the rates — which have remained stable,” Simonsen said, explaining his decision to vote against dissolving the MUA and bringing it into the local government.

Voll, as the township manager, would be the de facto head of the service if it were to merge with the government.

On the MUA issue, Douglass sums it up for the “Independents for Lower” ticket: “It should have been done.”

“All the facts are there. The Local Finance Board validated the plan, the numbers — it was just what is best for the community,” Douglass said. “It saves money, a lot of money, that can be held to protect the rates — and protect the ratepayers.”

“There’s no excuse,” he said. The proposal to move the police and court from the county-owned, 50,000-square-foot building at the Cape May Airport in Erma has also been mired in partisan politics.

According to a 2012 report prepared by the Public Safety Building Advisory Committee, the Police Department uses

about 18,650 square feet of the building, with an additional 2,000 square feet set aside for storage. The report indicated that the Police Department requires about 10,000 to 12,000 square feet to “satisfy staffing and related spaces to operate effectively.”

“There are guys on council who are trying to make this sound like a new idea, or something that has been hurried,” Neville said. “But that couldn’t be further from the truth. This issue has been on the table for a decade, going back to the 2005 study that council then commissioned.”

The Police Department and municipal court were moved to the airport building in 1995, pursuant to a long-term lease agreement with the county. According to a 2005 professional Space Utilization report, \$2 million in repairs were identified as necessary on roof repairs alone.

Simonsen asked the county to explore the possibility of sharing the space at the airport building, and therefore shar-

ing the cost of renovations and repairs. Walker agreed, with reservations: “You can’t study an issue to death, but we should see what the county says at this point. There are valid financial and law enforcement reasons to want the police at the township complex.”

“No one wants to make a decision without all the facts, but there comes a point when the questions seem almost like an obstruction for the sake of obstruction,” Walker said.

“And there’s a point when you need to stop throwing good money after bad. I just can’t imagine the repairs will be cost-effective, or a long-term solution for the problems with the building and location, and — most importantly — there’s a strong argument for having the police anchored in a high-population area, with the rest of the local government buildings.”

Following the defeat of a resolution to move forward in relocating the police station to Villas, Beck told said the real losers in the situation were the

residents. He said the upcoming election would allow voters to weigh in on both the police station and dissolution of the MUA.

“You could not have an election with a more clear delineation between the two sides,” Beck said. “It’s really important for people to look at it and choose which one they think is the correct side.”

He said Conrad let down the people of Ward One.

“Of all the areas that need that police station back here, I feel his area needs it more than any other and it is the needs center,” Beck said. “He had a chance, he voted not to hire police just two years ago by voting against the budget and now he votes not to bring the police station back here.”

“The reality is he has no plan for the safety of the people in Ward One,” he said.

During Township Council’s Oct. 6 meeting, Conrad said he voted against the 2013 spending plan due to items in the capital budget.

Court battle

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Wichterman said with the question the Lower Cape

May Regional School District placed on the Nov. 4 general election ballot asking if the funding formula should be

based on enrollment rather than property value, Cape May will have satisfied all the requirements it needs before going to court.

“If the Cape May voters reject or turn down the question on Dec. 9, does that mean you go forward anyhow?” asked Gaffney.

“I’ll face that when we get to it,” Wichterman replied.

Mayor Edward Mahaney said he concurred with the deputy mayor that voters should first have their say. He said it was not a fair question to put before council before an election.

“I think it’s a very good ‘what if?’ situation. I think people are concerned about that,” Gaffney said.

Wichterman asked what people were concerned. He said no one had talked to him about the situation.



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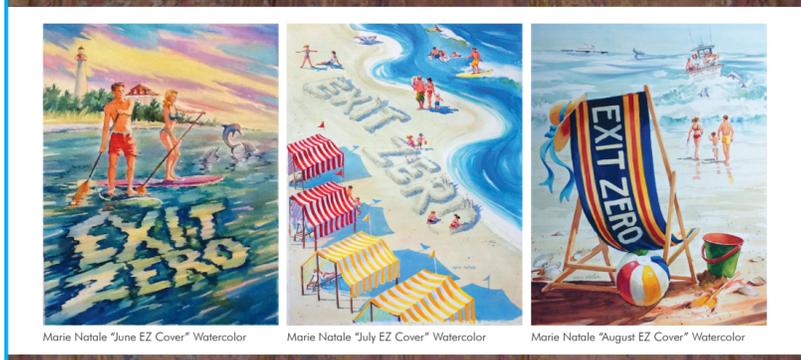
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