

It's About Both 2006 and Princeton's Future This Election Day

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On Tuesday, when Princeton Borough and Princeton Township voters head to the polls, to cast their votes, it will have less to do with local campaigns than with what's going on outside of the Princeton political landscape.

As has been the case more often than not in recent years, there aren't any contested races for local government in either the Borough or Township this year. The lone open seat on Township Committee, has, in fact, already been filled by its heir apparent, Chad Goerner, who was appointed by Committee to fill a vacancy on the governing body. Mr. Goerner's victory in the Democratic primary runoff this year has assured an easy win next week, as he has no opponents in the general election.

In the Borough, Council members Wendy Benchley and Barbara Trelstad and Council President Peggy Karcher are seeking reelection to full terms, all uncontested. Mayor Mildred Trotman, appointed to the mayor's seat in 2005 following the death of Mayor Joe O'Neill, is also running unopposed.

It's safe to say that the key ballot item is the increasingly heated contest between U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-Hoboken) and State Sen. Thomas Kean, Jr. (R-Westfield) in a race that has proved to be an unlikely battleground in a Democratic push to gain seats in the Senate. New Jersey is now one of four states, including Missouri, Virginia, and Tennessee, that are officially toss-ups in their respective Senate races. An October 25 poll conducted by the Rockville, Md. firm Research 2000 shows Mr. Menendez leading 48 percent to Mr. Kean's 42 percent in a survey of 600 likely voters.

So it's close in the Senate race, but not in the 12th District Congressional race, where incumbent Rush Holt (D-Hopewell Township) has a wide lead over challenger Joseph Sinagra (R-Helmetta). And of course, locally, there's simply no contest.

But that doesn't mean that local party organization is not offering its support for races outside Princeton Borough and Township, nor does it mean that the party heads are not preparing for future elections. Riding a wave of surging popularity resulting in increasing levels of resources, Princeton Democrats see the 2006 local elections as a means of recruiting new members to the Princeton Community Democratic Organization, and attracting party faithful by way of less municipal-oriented issues through subcommittees such as its Health Care Committee and Darfur Action Committee.

Conversely, Republicans are trying to rebuild a base on which they can run a candidate, particularly in the Township. In past years, Township Republicans have put forth a nominal candidate, with little success. In 2005 however, the debate over tax reform resulted in a stronger showing for Township Republicans than been seen in recent years. That, along with some renewed local interest, has built a foundation for reconstructing the party.

"We're looking at November 8 as day one," said Bill Spadea, a Township Republican who ran an unsuccessful bid to unseat Mr. Holt in 2004. "In 2005, nearly half the voters in the Township

signaled a need for change, but if we're really going to have to have an impact on our community, we need to think smart, and build so in a year or two we can get to 51 percent and get someone in office," he said.

Those familiar with the Republican leadership have indicated that the revitalized Republican Association of Princeton favors the 2005 ticket of Gordon Bryant and Tom Pyle, and that 2007, when two seats on Committee are up for grabs, could be a more opportune time to run. Mr. Spadea would not speculate on who would run in 2007, but did hope to build off of the stronger showing in 2005. "Our goal is to go beyond the election cycle and look toward the future," he said.

But Princeton Democrats are hardly resting on their laurels; in fact, while candidates in this uncontested election season have been uncharacteristically quiet, party leadership is mobilizing for future races, as well as current races outside of the local districts.

"Winning elections sort of generates momentum so you can continue to win elections," said Andrew Koontz, a Borough Councilman and the municipal chair of the Princeton Borough Democratic Committee. That momentum, Mr. Koontz said, puts other political parties at a disadvantage because the perception, at least in Princeton, could be that only those affiliated with the Democratic Party can be involved on the municipal level.

"I'm not so certain that's true," Mr. Koontz said, but added that civically active residents have been known to change party affiliation to get a foot in the political door. That said, PCDO has increased its role as the engine of the Democratic Party in the community. Founded in 1965 as a reform organization, the PCDO went through a significant lull in the 1970s, but regained strength in the mid-1980s when many of the current party leaders became active.

The party built its way up during a period of Republican rule to the point where the last Republican to leave elected office in either government was Borough Councilman Ray Wadsworth in 1994.

Additionally, due to the lack of general election opposition, if issues are to be raised during the election cycle, it has to be during the primary season, as was the case this year in the Township where now-Committeeman Chad Goerner defeated Scott Carver in a race that largely boiled down to differences in political philosophy.

Mr. Goerner, a relative newcomer to the political landscape, represented a change in candidates. He is younger, greener, and not as visibly associated with the PCDO old guard of the 1980s. Current party leadership, including PCDO President Jenny Crumiller, said candidates like Mr. Goerner are fleshed out in competitive primaries. "The total lack of competition in the local general election just underscores how in Princeton, the real decisions are made in the primary," she said.

But a major concern expressed by party leadership and political analysts alike is that without competition in a general election, issues typically discussed in the weeks before Election Day go by the wayside.

"We know that when races are not competitive, they simply are not covered," said Ingrid Reed, director of the Eagleton New Jersey Project at Rutgers. In close elections, she said, voters talk to each other, media reports outline the issues of the day, and the candidates make every opportunity to get their points across. In uncontested elections, "there's no way to raise that expectation in a kind of 'do good' way — and there really needs to be that mechanism," Ms. Reed said, calling on increased media coverage in one-sided races, as well as for candidates to show a willingness to

participate in public forums.

"Who puts that kind of pressure on the candidates? It's a place where the citizens have yet to figure out how to get that done. When it comes to standing up for what they ought to have, there's no vehicle."

In the meantime, both parties are lending their resources to races outside Princeton. The PCDO Web site outlines a phone bank supporting Linda Stender, the 7th Congressional District Democrat looking to unseat Rep. Mike Ferguson (R-New Providence). Additionally, RAP members have recruited young canvassers and have assembled donor events for Mr. Kean's election efforts.

At end of the day, both Mr. Spadea and Dan Preston, the Princeton Township Democratic Committee chair, said that local issues could be advanced, even when local races are not at stake. Party leadership, Mr. Preston said, can keep an eye on both the micro and macro at the same time. "We are able to both walk and chew gum," he said.

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