

Fulop for governor? Other Jersey City mayors have tried -- and failed

Fulop: one year later

by Terrence T. McDonald/The Jersey Journal
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It's no secret that Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop has his eyes on higher office.

Fulop, 37, has been swatting away rumors of his gubernatorial ambitions [since the moment he was elected mayor last year](#). He says he's focused on Jersey City and rumors to the contrary are just gossip among political reporters.

But his powerhouse fundraising schedule, plus moves like [hiring Democratic strategist Bob Sommer as an adviser](#) and [aligning himself with former Gov. Jim McGreevey](#), have political observers certain that Fulop hopes to succeed Gov. Chris Christie in 2018 – or sooner if Christie steps down to run for president.

Fulop wouldn't be the first Jersey City mayor to take a shot at running for governor. New Jersey history is littered with the failed gubernatorial runs of former Jersey City mayors who tried to make it to Drumthwacket.

Most recently, Bret Schundler lost a 2001 gubernatorial bid (to McGreevey) and failed to win the GOP nomination in the 2005 governor's race. Thomas F. X. Smith stepped down as mayor in 1981 to seek the Democratic nomination for governor, losing to Jim Florio, who then lost the general election in squeaker to Tom Kean.

Smith's predecessor, Paul T. Jordan, challenged then-Gov. Brendan Byrne in 1977 for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. Byrne swamped him at the polls, and then won the general election, too.

In 1916, Otto Wittpenn lost his race for governor to Republican Walter Edge.

'GRUBBY AND CORRUPT'

Why can't Jersey City mayors make the leap from 280 Grove St. to the Statehouse in Trenton?

Political experts say it's difficult for a mayor of any big city to gain supporters outside of their political base. An extra impediment for Jersey City mayors is the long-standing reputation of Hudson County as a hotbed of political corruption, they say.

John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, told The Jersey Journal that big-city mayors used to see their political careers end at City Hall because "city government was really seen as being sort of grubby and corrupt."

But that's changing, Weingart said, noting Cory Booker, the former Newark mayor who is now one of New Jersey's U.S. senators, and Ed Rendell, the former Philadelphia mayor who went on to win two terms as Pennsylvania's governor.

"I think, particularly for governor ... there's a logic to looking to someone who's had experience as an administrator of a larger organization," he said.

The last mayor who was elected as New Jersey's governor was – wait for it – McGreevey, who was Woodbridge's mayor for 10 years. You have to go back almost 70 years for the next one: Harold Giles Hoffman, the former South Amboy mayor who was elected governor in 1934.

In the last 100 years, only one Jersey City resident won election as governor: A. Harry Moore, who was elected three times, in 1925, 1931 and 1937. Moore was never mayor, but he was Wittpenn's secretary, a city collector and a city

commissioner starting in 1913. Frank Hague, mayor from 1917 to 1947, essentially orchestrated Moore's ascension to the governor's mansion.

"For a long time, Hague didn't have to run to be governor," said New Jersey City University political science professor Tom Moran. "He would put somebody who was sort of on his side in the governor's seat. I think that taint probably hurt a lot, for subsequent candidates."

Schundler, a Republican, said Fulop "has a good chance" at winning the governor's race in three years if he decides to run, mostly because Schundler thinks the next winner will be a Democrat.

"As long as New Jersey remains a Democratically leaning state, I think Republicans will only win the governorship after Democrats have been in office and manage to screw it up," he said.

FULOP: 'I'M HYPER-ENGAGED'

When Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray [declared in February that he considered Fulop a gubernatorial candidate](#), Fulop critic Rich Boggiano, who represents Ward C on the City Council, took to Facebook to list all the mayors who have tried and failed to win the governor's mansion, adding, in all caps, "You wonder why Jersey City cannot prosper."

Last week, Boggiano, asked to describe one positive Fulop initiative, said he appreciates the publicity the mayor has brought to Jersey City. But the councilman couldn't resist adding a dig at Fulop.

"He's made Jersey City well-known throughout the country, but is that for our benefit or for his future benefits to run for governor?" Boggiano said.

Fulop denied that he's laying the groundwork to succeed Christie rather than concentrating on Jersey City. As evidence of his focus on Jersey City, he told The Jersey Journal that [the newspaper has seen his calendar](#), "so you know what my meeting schedule is like."

After a reporter noted that city attorneys blacked out half that schedule, Fulop nodded and said, "Fair enough." Nonetheless, he said, he's "hyper engaged" in every aspect of city government.

"I am engaged in trash pickup, I'm engaged in recycling, I'm engaged in policing, I'm engaged in the fire department structure, I'm engaged in healthy living, I'm engaged in revamping the 911 system, I'm engaged in all that stuff," he said. "I don't think you could say that I'm not."

Any suggestion that Fulop may run for governor elicits sighs from even his staunchest supporters, many of whom worked hard to get him elected as Jersey City's mayor and have no interest in him high-tailing it to Trenton after one term.

They tell The Jersey Journal that they worry if he runs and wins, he'll leave a "hole" in the Jersey City political world that may be filled by the "old school machine" they just spent years trying to defeat.

Voters may not think too kindly of his gubernatorial designs, either.

"That would tick me off," said Patricia Robinson, of Wegman Parkway, who didn't vote for Fulop in last year's mayoral race but approves of his job performances so far. "That would mean he used us."