

Influx of 20-something candidates in Essex freeholder race may speak to millennial political trend

By Jessica Mazzola | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com
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(Left top to bottom right) Essex County freeholder candidates John Anello, Britnee Timberlake, Len Luciano, and John Kelly. (Photos courtesy of candidates)

ESSEX COUNTY — Four retirements from the Essex County Board of Chosen Freeholders this year has made room for a new slate of young candidates who experts say might be reflective of a trend. An increase in voting among young people since the 2008 presidential election may have translated to an increase in the number of millennials seeking political office, on both sides of the aisle.

Of the 21 candidates running for 9 open freeholder seats, at least four are in their twenties, and several more are in their early thirties. Some are recent college grads, others are pursuing advanced degrees and political office at the same time. But all say that their young ages position them to bring new ideas to the table.

“My generation can’t afford to buy homes,” [John Kelly](#), a 29-year-old Republican candidate for the District 5 freeholder seat, said in an interview.

In an effort to reduce the tax rate in Essex County, the Nutley resident has campaigned on the idea of creating a county-run bank, chartered by the state, that he said would take the place of the three major banking institutions that

handle the county's money now. The bank, he argues, would save money on fees being paid to the outside banks, and would be able to bring in revenue by offering loans to home and small business owners in Essex.

"I think these are the types of innovative ideas that the freeholder board needs to be talking about," he said.

On the Democratic ticket in District 3, [Britnee Timberlake](#), 28, says that although she is young, she's had enough life experience to bring informed ideas to the governing body.

The East Orange resident founded the Essex Community Land Trust, a nonprofit that supports the creation of affordable housing, in 2010. She also owns a catering company that donates food to homeless shelters and runs a "College Bound Cookies" fundraiser after every catering event that allows kids to raise money for their schools while saving money for college.

She's campaigned on ideas of increasing aid available to residents through the housing department, add services through reforms of the welfare office, and increase the rehab and education programs offered through the county jail.

"I worked a bunch of different jobs to put myself through college, I bought a condo at a young age, I've founded a company. People may associate my age with a lack of know how, but that's not the case. I've gone through the same challenges that a lot of people in Essex County have," she said.

"Politics is something that affects all of us," said John Anello, a 27-year-old Republican attorney from Belleville running for one of the four open at-large freeholder seats. "If you don't get involved, it'll pass you by. I'm glad so many younger people are getting involved."

[Len Luciano](#), who was first appointed to the board three years ago at age 30 and is now running for reelection to his District 4 seat, said he hopes the trend in Essex County is one that is both reflective of that in other places across the nation, and could inspire other young potential politicians to get involved in government.

"I, of course, respect the insight of veteran (politicians), but it's great to see younger folks getting a seat at the table," he said. "We are the future."

LeRoy Jones, the Chairman of the Essex County Democratic Committee, said he is happy to see younger members of his party get involved in politics, so long as a mix of age groups remains on the freeholder board.

"There are definitely different degrees of experience, and we want to get the complete perspective (on the board)," he said. "It's part of the evolution...the generational turnover."

Long-serving freeholders echoed Jones's sentiments.

"We've always had a diverse freeholder board," Patricia Sebold, who has served as a freeholder for the past 21 years and is up for reelection this year, said. "It reflects our county. It's good to have a mixed board, to have all ages represented."

Recent [Pew Research Center](#) and [Reason-Rupe public opinion surveys](#) have found that millennials are more detached from traditional political institutions than their parents were, but that they are very opinionated about government policy issues.

Local experts say that although the influx of millennial candidates in the Essex County freeholder race may not be echoed across the nation yet, it may be indicative of things to come from the generation.

"Generally, people in their 20s aren't running for major political offices...partly because they are at a transient stage in their lives and are still getting settled," according to David Redlawsk, a political science professor at the Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics and director of the Rutgers-Eagleton poll.

"But, the millennial generation might be more politically active, due in part to the Obama effect. Since there were more young people voting (in the last two presidential elections), you would expect to see a larger subset of those voters become more actively involved in politics."

With the Essex freeholder race as only one example of many political races across the state and country, Redlawsk said only time will tell exactly how and when the millennial generation will seek political office. "It'll be hard to truly tell until we are somewhat down the road."

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