

Recall group takes aim at Sheriff Trout

Posted by [rsbrickm](#) December 11, 2008 10:30AM

Some residents have begun an all-out push to oust Hunterdon County Sheriff Deborah Trout. They huddled Sunday for a strategy session and on Tuesday they launched the Web site [OutWithTrout.org](#). They say they'll organize volunteers to circulate petitions and put a recall question on next November's ballot.

They intend to file as an official committee early in January. It may mark the first effort to recall a county-level elected official in New Jersey history.

"Often, citizens threaten," said policy analyst Ingrid Reed of Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics, "but it doesn't come to fruition." That's partly because the hurdles are daunting, she said.

Filing with County Clerk Mary Melfi would start a 160-day clock during which the committee must collect signatures from 25% of county voters who were registered in the last general election.

The number they need is 21,866, said Ms. Melfi. "But it never hurts to get more." That's because if there is a challenge to the petition, her office must verify that each signature exactly matches the information on the voter registration rolls. If a voter is registered as John Q. Public but signs the petition as John Public or John Quentin Public, that signature may not count.

There have been efforts to recall municipal officials around the state, Ms. Reed said, and some have been successful.

But Jack Mosloom at the N.J. League of Counties talked to officials in each of New Jersey's 21 counties and none could remember a campaign against a county official.

"That doesn't mean it never happened in history, but these are people with long institutional memories," he said. "Nothing -- at least not in the last 20 years."

Such news doesn't dampen the ardor of organizer Dennis Mabrey. "There's a cancer in the Sheriff's Office," he said at Sunday's meeting in his Readington Township office.

As administrator of the online discussion site [njtalkforums.com](#), Mr. Mabrey was threatened with prosecution by Undersheriff Michael Russo last spring after refusing to remove posts criticizing the Sheriff's Office.

The OutWithTrout.org group is seeking legal, political and accounting advice and is "going by the book," said Mr. Mabrey, because he expects the sheriff and Mr. Russo to mount a legal challenge.

The Web site includes excerpts from a report by a 2000 state Commission of Investigation of county Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The report alleges corruption on the part of Mr. Russo, who led the Warren County SPCA at the time. Mr. Russo used Fifth Amendment protections to avoid answering the commission's questions. Earlier this year, Mr. Russo said that he'd done nothing wrong. Mr. Mabrey dismissed those claims.

"It's like the Bible," Mr. Mabrey said about the SCI report. "Every time I go in there I find something I didn't see before." He is concerned about Mr. Russo's background, saying, "We know that history has a way of repeating itself."

His comments set off other members of the core group.

"Her appointees have been involved in altercations with the law," said Michael Simon of Readington Township. He thinks the sheriff must have known about her appointees' backgrounds before hiring them.

In the past six months, two sheriff's investigators and Undersheriff Russo have been investigated by the Hunterdon County Prosecutor's Office. Gregory Ezekian Jr. and John Falat Jr. were charged with lying about their backgrounds and have resigned. Mr. Ezekian pleaded guilty to a lesser charge. He was stripped of his license to carry weapons and was barred from public employment in New Jersey. Prosecutors intend to present Mr. Falat's case to the grand jury next year. No charges have been filed against Mr. Russo.

Donna Simon, a Republican County Committee member, said, "There is an ethical, legal, fiscal responsibility that the sheriff has to the people who voted her in that she has violated and abused." She and her husband have spoken to 18 elected officials who offered varying degrees of support, she said.

Sheriff Trout "came across as the anti-party candidate," said Mary Mott, a Baptistown attorney and president of the Hunterdon County Bar Association. "She was going to change things." Instead, she said, things have gotten worse. "I know lots of people at the county Justice Center. Everybody is aghast at what's going on."

"Ethics are very often the issue in a recall," said Ms. Reed of the Eagleton Institute. "It's often the choices the person has made in the job, as opposed to mismanagement." If criminal activities are the issue, law enforcement proceedings often make a recall effort unnecessary, she said.

The recall effort could cost taxpayers \$187,000 if a special election had to be held, but organizer Mr. Mabrey said the plan is to get the question on November's general election ballot.

The Freeholders have contested Sheriff Trout's staffing decisions, her budget and her compliance with county vehicle policies since she took office on Jan. 1.

She has taken them to court twice over the budget dispute, claiming the plan was too small for her staff to provide security at the county Justice Center. She threatened to close the courthouse and she changed its hours of operations to make her point.

Freeholder George Melick last week called for Sheriff Trout to resign. The five-man Freeholder board may discuss his resolution on Dec. 16. Several Freeholders said after the Dec. 2 meeting that they wouldn't sign a petition for a recall election because that would force them to recuse themselves every time a Sheriff's Office issue came before the board. They would be "locked out" of discussions, said Freeholder Ron Sworen.

Mr. Melick isn't the only elected official who has criticized the sheriff publicly. Hampton Mayor Rob Walton has said he would support a recall effort. A prior obligation kept him from attending Sunday's meeting, he said. Mr. Walton, who is county Republican Committee vice chairman, said "at least five Republican office holders" have asked the party to support them in a bid for the sheriff's job, should a recall effort unseat Ms. Trout before her three-year term ends on Dec. 31, 2010.

The OutWithTrout.org core group plans to meet again before New Year's Day. They are seeking a Flemington area location that could hold a crowd to kick off the campaign in January.

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Comments

GlassEyes says...

Bravo to you people who are finally going through with the OUT With TROUT. I hear they are all laughing about this because they think they will never be ousted. Russo, hopefully you will finally be brought down to the size you really are. ZIP!!! ZERO !!! NILCH !!! I can't believe Trout went for everything you said and still listens to you hook, line and sinker. I still wonder what you have on her for her to keep you there. As for Trout, well, I hope she gets jail time also because she knew way before hand that Falet and Ezekian should have never been hired by her. Russo had them fired.

I also hear how the Warren Co. Sheriff's Office laughed him right out of the Court House when he wanted them to back him in last year's election. That is why he had Trout run. Better chance for him to get into a position he now holds. He will take 2nd best as show but we all know he runs that Office.

So let's get this going and cross all out T's and dot all our I's and make sure a period is where it belongs. Your on your way out Russo.

Notice how your brought down more Russo then Trout?? The 5th won't help you now. You can't plead the 5th to the Grand Jury Jury so I hope you make up some great lies so you can get fried faster before the Prosecutor's. Then bye-bye BUDDY BOY!!!

Posted on 12/11/08 at 12:41PM

feddup46 says...

There's too much hate coming out of those "GlassEyes". The truth is in the next to last paragraph, five sharks are circling for the job. I'm a republican and ashamed of how the party has aired its laundry in public. Sore losers and nasty people. There were so many different ways to fix these issues yet you and they choose or rather scream for crucifixion. I hope you don't celebrate Christmas, it would be hypocrisy.

Posted on 12/11/08 at 4:28PM

npsguy9821 says...

I think it is important to remember the people that Sheriff Trout brought into the HCSO.

One special investigator plead guilty to lying on his application this year. He was fired from Morris county for the same reason. He can no longer serve in law enforcement in New Jersey. Also in August 2006 he ran from the state police while intoxicated and had to be 'hunted' down via helicopter.

Might I also add he his police academy certification was expired... meaning he was not allowed to be on the streets with a gun unless he went back through academy training.

And this is the man Trout swore she did a background check on.

The other special investigator Trout brought in was recently arrested by the Hunterdon County prosecutor's office for lying on his application as well.

All of this was reported in the Hunterdon Democrat.

Posted on 12/11/08 at 8:10PM

GlassEyes says...

No, feddup. No hate in my eyes. Just honest to goodness truth.

I am sorry if you seem that you hate to see the truth being said about these people.

People aired their dirty laundry in public so that the people of Hunterdon County can live a safe life. Have a good Sheriff's Office. I am not the person who made most of her people quit their jobs and go else where for employment. Trout and Russo did that all by themselves.

You must be the type of person who is friendly with them and will help them out to the end. Well I am not and I will not have someone as unstable as Russo carry a weapon. Look what has happened to that Office. She hires his buddies knowing full well about their back grounds. Russo threatens a moderator will a legal suit if he didn't take down posts. Then he writes a email claiming to be Trout and then when it was brought to Trout's attention she said she never wrote the email but it came from her account. HMMMMM.... wonder who wrote it.