

NEWS

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Both parties having trouble recruiting legislative candidates

By **MATT FRIEDMAN**, PolitickerNJ.com Reporter

For different reasons, both Democrats and Republicans have had a difficult time recruiting candidates in some key legislative districts this year.

Some Republicans say they're having the best recruitment year in recent memory, with Governor Corzine's anemic poll numbers giving hope to the long beleaguered minority party. But the GOP has had a difficult time recruiting candidates in two districts that were expected to be the most competitive in the state.

Less surprising is the Democrats' failure to field their top choices in District 2 in South Jersey, where they hoped to play offense against two freshman Republican incumbents.

"I think that economic challenges of getting a message out, as well as the challenges of public services, are unique to any candidate," said Democratic State Chairman Joseph Cryan (D-Union), who's also an assemblyman. "Certain situations make it more difficult."

In District 14, where even Democrats admit that Freshman Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Mercer) could be vulnerable, Mercer County Republicans went through several potential candidates before finding one who was willing to run. And while they ultimately settled on restaurateur Rob Calabro, he did not show up to last night's nominating convention and, despite claims to the contrary from party leaders, sources say he may be a placeholder candidate.

Calabro could not be reached for comment today.

Monmouth University pollster and political science professor Patrick Murray said that if Calabro is indeed a placeholder candidate, it doesn't bode well for Republicans' ability to compete in the 14th.

"That's a pretty bad sign. You want somebody who's ready to run and is out there starting to shake hands and knock on doors. That's how [Republican state Senator] Bill Baroni won it," said Murray. "That's a district that responds to one on one contact with the candidates, so you need one who's already named and ready to go right now."

In Middlesex County, which makes up the other part of the 14th Legislative District, Republican Chairman Joe Leo said that he's having the easiest time in his seven-year tenure as chairman in selecting a candidate. Three prospective candidates who Leo would not name have stepped forward to run for the other 14th District seat (sources say former freeholder candidate Lynda Woods Cleary is at the top of the list).

In Bergen County, Republicans had sought out East Rutherford Councilman Joel Brizzi as their top choice to run for assembly against Fred Scalera (D-Nutley) and Gary Schaer (D-Passaic) in District 36, which state party leaders have said they intend to make a battleground this year. Brizzi declined, leaving Republicans to select the exact same ticket they ran two years ago: Nutley businessman Carmen Pio Costa and Carlstadt Board of Education member Don Diorio.

Yudin, however, said that despite the initial hiccup, there was no shortage of willing candidates to fill the spot.

"We haven't had this kind of situation in five years, where people were banging down the doors to get the nomination," he said.

Republicans did not have any problem fielding candidates in District 1, however, which observers think holds their best chance at picking up seats in the assembly. Attorney Mike Donohue, who ran last year, is running with Upper Township Committeeman Frank Conrad against incumbents Nelson Albano (D-Vineland) and Matt Milam (D-Vineland). This time, state Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D-Cape May), whose coattails were credited with giving Albano and Milam their narrow victories, is not on the ballot.

Democrats had planned to pour serious resources in District 2, where state Sen. Jim Whelan (D-Atlantic) won in 2007 but couldn't pull his running mates with him. They've chosen **Horthfield Councilman Jimmy Martinez and Rev. Reginald Floyd** to run against incumbents John Amodeo (R-Margate) and Vince Polistina (R-Egg Harbor Township). But that was only after Democrats tried to recruit Jeff Blitz, a Republican and former county prosecutor, and Freeholder Alisa Cooper.

Privately, most Democrats admit that the governor's unpopularity has indeed made recruitment more difficult.

Ingrid Reed, who directs the Eagleton Institute's New Jersey Project, said that Corzine's unpopularity, the economic state of the nation and of the state -- and the fact that Democrats are the party in power during such tough times -- has likely made it much more difficult than usual to find candidates.

"I'm not as surprised that the Democrats would have trouble getting people to run," she said.

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