Mahr Readies for New Post on Ethics Panel
The Fanwood mayor was recently chosen by Gov. Corzine to help lead an ethics review.

By Jeffrey Cummins | Email the author | August 21, 2009

Now that Colleen Mahr has been named to Gov. Jon Corzine's new ethics task force, the Fanwood mayor says she is ready to start looking for ways to improve New Jersey's ethical image.

"It's a 10-month job that we've been given to look at something that is really such a big issue in the State of New Jersey," Mahr said. "We're going to try to figure out what is working and not working in terms of the laws that are on the books."

Mahr, who was named to the panel on Aug. 13, will serve with 11 other New Jersey officials, including Weehawken Mayor Richard Turner; Patricia Parkin McNamara, executive secretary of the Local Finance Board for the Department of Community Affairs; and William John Kearns Jr., lawyer for the New Jersey League of Municipalities.

Gov. Corzine first announced the creation of an ethics panel last fall, but didn't appoint members to serve on it until last week, in light of the recent highly publicized probe conducted by the FBI.

The task force will address many concerns, among them the negative public perception of political officials, something that impacts politicians locally and beyond the borders of New Jersey. Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project with the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, is the chairwoman of the task force. Mahr, who also currently serves as president of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors, said someone in the governor's office recommended her for the panel.

Mahr said her role on the task force has yet to be defined.

"So far, where it was left was that I would get some paperwork forwarded to me and I would then be contacted by the chairwoman to move forward with a schedule of meetings," Mahr said. "We haven't met as a group."

The ethics task force will be given 10 months from its first meeting to issue a report. The group will be looking at the existing ethics laws in the state, which have been on the books since 1991.

"I'm sure that this is going to be a very far-reaching area that we look at, in light of the recent sweep of arrests of politicians, elected officials and religious officials," Mahr said.

While Mahr is honored by the appointment, she says her selection is also a tribute to the Borough of Fanwood.

"This is a great honor for me as a mayor, but I really think it speaks volumes about the Borough of Fanwood and even Union County that as a local elected official, I would be looked at to really be a strong voice of ethical reform in the State of New Jersey," Mahr said. "I have always tried to stay within the very clear lines that are defined when you become an elected official because there is a trust that the public gives you to always do the right thing and never put oneself first. I think that I've always done that. I make $1 a year, so I certainly am not doing this for any financial gain. I am the mayor in my second term, and I think the fact that we have a very open and transparent local government might have helped in my selection."

Mahr cited the borough's recent completion of a Citizens Budget Review Committee as an example of Fanwood's commitment to staying open and honest about its work.

"I don't know of any other town around us that has one and really just opens up the books and says to a bi-partisan group of residents, 'Here it is. Help us. If you see something, challenge us," Mahr said. "I think that certainly speaks volumes of the type of ethical government that we have here. So it's a very proud day for me personally, but on a larger scale, for the Borough of Fanwood."

One of the challenges Mahr will have will be juggling the responsibilities she has as mayor with those she'll have as a member of the task force.

"You have this sort of culture of corruption that has developed in people's minds about politicians," she said. "I think that sort of deep distrust has evolved over time here in New Jersey, and I think that addressing that goes hand-in-hand with addressing the laws that are on the books themselves."

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