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Parking spot trouble plays role in Assembly election

By *TIM ZATZARINY Jr.*
Staff Writer

Matthew Milam isn't embarrassed about pleading guilty in January to parking in a handicapped space.

In fact, the 1st District assemblyman said, "that has turned out to be such a huge positive."

The incident is expected to become an important piece of ammunition in Republicans' fight to unseat their Democratic opponents -- Milam and his running mate, Assemblyman Nelson Albano -- in the Nov. 3 election.

"I can tell you that I've had a lot of people mention it to me, going door to door," Republican candidate Michael Donohue said last week. "People say, 'Who are you running against?' and when I tell them, people say, 'Oh, that's the guy who parked in the handicapped space.'"

Milam, who is not disabled, illegally parked his 2006 GMC Yukon in a handicapped space next to Old Oar House Irish Pub on North High Street in Millville on Oct. 17.

Milam, a Vineland resident, contended before his guilty plea that the parking spot wasn't properly marked.

Following the publicity that surrounded his ticket, Milam said, he heard from senior citizens and disability-rights groups. He said he's using their feedback to draft a bill that would create more uniform standards for maintaining handicapped parking spots in New Jersey to ensure they're properly marked for motorists.

Milam said he did not know when the bill would be drafted.

"It gets down to looking out for the handicapped who need these spots," Milam said after he pleaded guilty Jan. 12 in Millville Municipal Court, "and a person who would, accidentally, like I did, park in that spot."

Milam paid a \$256 fine, plus \$33 in court costs, with a personal check.

The assemblyman initially had decided to fight the ticket by going to trial, but later said he wanted to avoid costing taxpayers money and wasting the court's time.

The space where Milam parked is designed to accommodate vans with hydraulic lifts for wheelchairs. He said he parked in the access area next to the space that is marked with diagonal blue stripes, but said he did not see the markings when he pulled in that night because they were faded.

Donohue, an attorney who serves as municipal prosecutor in Stone Harbor and Avalon, said in his experience, most people just plead guilty when cited for parking in a handicapped space.

"It's very rare to have someone ask to be put on the trial list when they're charged with it," he said. "I think most people, the general public, understand that if it looks like a handicapped spot, don't park in it."

Donohue's running mate is John McCann, a Realtor based in Ocean City. They face an uphill in unseating the Democratic incumbents, according to a poll released last week by the Hughes Center at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

A political expert said although illegally parking in a handicapped space is a touchy issue, it shouldn't overshadow the larger issues the state faces.

"It's different if someone's intoxicated, or there's a real pattern, but people can be great legislators without being great drivers," said John Weingart, associate director of the nonpartisan Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

"It's the wrong thing to do," Weingart said of Milam's offense, "but what does that tell you about whether he'll be a good representative in Trenton?"

Marilyn Golden, a policy analyst with the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund in Berkeley, Calif., said Milam's case brings welcome attention to the issue of accessible parking for people with disabilities.

"I think it's important that he asked disability organizations in New Jersey what they would like to see," Golden said.

But, she said creating a law to deal with the issue "may feel good politically, but that may or may not really solve the problem."

What is needed, she said, is a more nuanced program that ensures the spaces are properly marked and

maintained.

Additional Facts

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- www.donohuemccann09.com
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