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Tussle turns testy as ward campaign heats up in New Brunswick

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With just a week to go before Election Day, those on each side of the city's ward referendum are accusing the other side of trying to suppress public discourse on the matter.

Benjamin Bucca, a member of anti-ward group Unite New Brunswick, filed a police report last week saying about 100-125 anti-ward yard signs were stolen from homes throughout the city early last week.

Middlesex County Freeholder and City Councilwoman Blanquita Valenti was among those who reported having a sign stolen. Valenti said her sign, and all the others in her Dewey Heights neighborhood, were stolen on Oct. 17.

"It's not a nice feeling that somebody had the nerve to come on my property and take something," she said.

Charles Kratovil, the campaign manager for the pro-ward group Empower Our Neighborhoods, said his group is not behind the thefts. He said he is too busy working on the campaign to spend time stealing signs.

"I can assure you if in fact it is an organized effort it is not us organizing it," he said.

Lt. J.T. Miller said city police are investigating the sign thefts. He said the sign-stealers may also have committed criminal mischief or trespassing.

Meanwhile, Kratovil said his group had to cancel a public meeting that was to be held at the Riverside Apartments on George Street last week after apartment officials said the room couldn't be used for political purposes.

Kratovil said he had scheduled a meeting for Oct. 20 as a means to reach out to residents.

"I figured it would still be a good opportunity to answer people's questions and hear what they had to say as much as anything," Kratovil said.

But at 1:49 p.m. the day of the meeting, Kratovil said he received a call saying the meeting space could not be used. Kratovil believes the cancelation was an effort by city officials to quiet his group's views.

Joe Ealy, senior property manager at the apartment complex, said the complex could not host the meeting because federal law bars agencies that receive federal funding from participating in political events. The complex includes a public housing component, he said. Ealy said a staff member who was not aware of that law scheduled EON's meeting in error.

Ingrid Reed, a policy analyst with Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, said these types of claims are evidence of a hotly-contested race.

"I think what you're seeing in New Brunswick is a campaign that has very high emotional involvement," she said.

Reed said while these types of accusations might have an impact at the polls, she thinks voters will decide based on the pros and cons of the ward referendum itself.

"I think it's more the issue itself and also with issues like this it's very important who is working to promote one or the other issue," she said. "When campaigns are very local, they also tend to be very personal, so you look at who you know and who is supporting one side or the other."

Unite New Brunswick has the support of the entire City Council as well as Mayor Jim Cahill, who is lending his voice to an automated recorded telephone call, or "robocall", which has been dialing up the homes of registered voters in the city this month. In the message, Cahill urges residents to vote no on the referendum and says wards have been a failure in every urban center where they have been tried.

Cahill said his campaign committee is funding the calls and he said he was prompted to actively campaign against wards because he thinks EON has failed to give a good reason why wards would improve the city.

"After looking at the arguments both for and against wards and looking at the actual experience that wards have had in all the major cities in New Jersey that have them, there is no doubt in my mind that the form of government that we have today is significantly better than the form proposed by EON," Cahill said.

Kratovil said his group is operating telephone banks, manned by volunteers, instead of robocalls. The automated calls, he said, are proof that the city current leadership is out of touch with its residents, which is one major reason he believes wards are needed.

"The fact is our elected officials are out of touch with the community and so far removed from their issues," he said. "I think this is a prime example. Our mayor is basically issuing thousands of phone calls where nobody can actually speak but they can just listen to the mayor talk for 60 seconds and then hang up the phone."
