

Adler: Staff not behind petition

By JANE ROH • Courier-Post Staff • August 5, 2010

EVESHAM — Rep. John Adler this week broke his long silence about allegations his supporters helped an elusive Tea Party candidate get on the 3rd Congressional District ballot.

The freshman Democrat reaffirmed a statement from his campaign manager, Geoff Mackler, that none of his staffers had interacted with Peter DeStefano, the NJ Tea Party candidate. The Mount Laurel man has refused in-person interviews with the Courier-Post.

Asked if he would disavow any effort by supporters to get DeStefano on the ballot and promote his own candidacy against Republican Jon Runyan, Adler said, "I don't like to answer hypothetical questions. I know we weren't part of it.

"Whatever they did -- I know what I do, and I hold my head high about what I do."

DeStefano collected 237 signatures on his ballot petitions. Dozens of Democrats who turn out for primaries as well as general elections signed the NJ Tea Party candidate's petitions. Among the signatories were relatives of Eric Spevak, a longtime Adler supporter. The Spevaks have donated thousands of dollars to Adler over the years.

Spevak's son Marshall, a longtime Adler aide and campaign staffer, also signed the petition. In a brief Facebook exchange with the Courier-Post last month, he said he was angry Adler voted against President Barack Obama's health care reform.

Marshall Spevak now works on the Delaware Senate campaign of Democrat Chris Coons.

Adler said he hasn't spoken with the Spevaks since a July 19 Courier-Post report on their possible connection to DeStefano.

The campaign has largely been unresponsive to questions about why Adler supporters might have helped DeStefano get on the ballot.

Adler agreed to speak with the Courier-Post Tuesday following the grand opening of his Marlton campaign office.

"Every campaign I've ever seen has somebody doing something that I scratch my head about," he said.

"I know what I'm responsible for and I try to do a good job as a member of Congress and as a candidate to try to move in a good direction."

Asked again if he would denounce an effort to confuse conservative voters and split their vote to his benefit, the Cherry Hill Democrat said, "I'm not concerned about tactics. I'm concerned about trying to get 50 percent of the vote by being someone who works hard for my district and by focusing on issues I'm hearing about at all these town hall meetings."

A viable Tea Party candidate here would almost certainly compete with the Republican candidate for votes -- to the benefit of the Democratic incumbent, according to political observers.

Polling so far shows people attracted to the Tea Party are overwhelmingly Republican, said John Weingart of the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics.

"A strong showing by a Tea Party candidate in the general election would be helpful to the Democrat," he added.

DeStefano's inclusion in an internal Adler poll conducted in June raised hackles among Republicans. The poll findings -- considered questionable by polling experts -- made DeStefano

seem like a viable third-party choice in the contest between Adler and Runyan.

The leak of the poll came less than a year after the Democratic State Committee admitted it paid for robocalls boosting independent Chris Daggett, an apparent effort to weaken Republican Chris Christie's support in the governor's race.

"I know based on the Marshall Spevak connection we are able to establish over and above a real connection to DeStefano," said Chris Russell, campaign adviser for Runyan.

"The first time you ever heard DeStefano's name was in an internal poll commissioned by Adler clearly to, one, get this guy's name out there; and two, run up phony numbers that would help Adler with inside-the-Beltway chatter."

Area Tea Party organizations have denounced DeStefano as a plant. On July 24, the North New Jersey Tea Party and North Jersey Regional Tea Party called for a formal investigation.

Eric Spevak is a leader of the Jewish War Veterans of Cherry Hill and until last spring was the township's Veterans Affairs Liaison. The 3rd district is home to Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.

A high-profile divorce attorney, the elder Spevak was nominated in January as a workers compensation judge. He currently works for the Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

Neither Eric nor Marshall Spevak returned further requests for comment.

Republicans do not suggest Adler himself was involved in boosting DeStefano. Rather, they point fingers at Camden County Democrats. The county committee in Cherry Hill is the nerve center of the party's South Jersey operation.

The three Democratic county committees in the 3rd District -- Burlington, Camden, and Ocean -- have not responded to interview requests. Last week, Camden committee co-chairs and state senators Donald Norcross and James Beach issued a written statement.

"This is a matter between the candidates running in the 3rd Congressional District," the statement said.

Without support from active Tea Party groups, DeStefano's candidacy appears dead in the water.

"If he was a legitimate or credible Tea Party candidate, then it could've been a real problem for us," Russell said.

"But at the end of the day, the Democrats were sloppy as hell. Whoever they delegated this to screwed up royally."

Russell acknowledged Runyan's candidacy was benefitting from the DeStefano story, but denied he could take credit.

"What they've done unintentionally, by insulting the intelligence of the Tea Party groups, is they've galvanized them against DeStefano and against Adler," Russell said.

"Is Jon Runyan going to benefit from that? Right now it looks like he could. But we're not taking anything for granted."

Adler said the Democrats who helped him win the traditionally Republican district in 2008 had reason to be unhappy. He attributes his vote against Obama's health care bill to concerns about the cost.

"I know there are some people in this room who have been annoyed with me," Adler told a group of supporters at Tuesday's office opening.

"Some people think I reach across the aisle too much. But I think it's my obligation to try to bring people together in this district, in this Congress, in this country. I need your help to get there."

Runyan countered that the DeStefano saga reinforced his impression of Adler as a career politician desperate to stay in office.

"That's a big reason why I got involved in this race -- because it's politics as usual," the former Eagle said.

"It's disgusting. It's what's broken about politics and it's what really needs changing."

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