

Voters in many South Jersey towns will have limited options at polls

By **ROB SPAHR** Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, October 28, 2011 11:24 pm

When voters go to the polls Nov. 8, they will have limited, partisan options to choose from in deciding who will govern their communities and purse strings.

Of the 54 municipalities in Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and southern Ocean counties with vacancies on their governing bodies, more than half, 29, have an incomplete slate of candidates on this year's ballot.

There are 21 towns in Atlantic County with municipal elections this year, but voters in only nine of those towns will have both a Republican and a Democrat to choose from for all of the open seats.

Only eight of the 14 municipalities in southern Ocean County have a full compliment of candidates, and only seven of Cumberland County's 11 local elections are fully contested.

And even though only three of the eight municipal races in Cape May County are uncontested, no voters in that county will have a full ballot to vote on as the Democratic Party there failed to field candidates for the open sheriff's seat and two positions on the Board of Chosen Freeholders.

"This is one of the realities of living in New Jersey with such a large number of local governments and such a large number of local offices to fill," said John Weingart of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics. "I don't know the trends, but I would say this is more or less a problem throughout the entire state."

Weingart said he thinks the traditionally low voter turnout in a nonpresidential, nongubernatorial, noncongressional election year such as this played little part in the lack of candidates.

"Occasionally it is a strategic decision if there is a popular candidate you don't run a candidate against. But it's generally not a sign of good health of an opposing party if they don't field a candidate," said Weingart, adding that what makes more sense is that it is becoming harder to recruit candidates than in years past.

Cape May County's Democratic Party Chairman James Pickering said he asked "hundreds, if not thousands" of people to run for the open seats in that county this year, to no avail.

"In these times, it has become much harder to find someone willing to make the commitment of time, money, resources, attention, energy and time away from their families to run," Pickering said. "There is also a general sense, among qualified candidates, that they don't want to deal with the impact that running for an office can have on their families. There is a lot more unfair attacks and personal attacks on people than there used to be. ... So it is an easy question to ask, 'Why don't you have someone running for an office?' It is much harder to find a candidate who will."

The issue crosses party lines.

"I think it is a symptom of politics," Cape May County Republican Chairman Michael Donohue said. "I ran for Assembly twice, and my opponents broadcast ads that I was collecting four pensions, when I don't even have one pension. I think people see stuff like that and say, 'Why would I put myself through that?' And that is a shame, because I believe it is good for democracy to have a clash of ideas."

Weingart said it also is getting harder for potential candidates to convince their spouses and employers that running for office is a constructive way to spend their time.

"Having to hear people constantly tell you that 'all politicians are corrupt' everywhere you go has to be a disincentive," he said.

“Talk to anyone who has been in an elected office for any period of time, it’s less fun than it used to be.”

Leonard T. Connors Jr. was elected to his first term as Surf City’s mayor in 1965 and went on to also serve as an Ocean County freeholder and a state senator. This year, the 82-year-old is running unopposed, yet again, for the seat he has held for nearly a half-century.

“In the early days when I was running for mayor and freeholder, there was a lot of campaigning, and there were some nasty races. But there is less campaigning now, and I don’t really like that because during campaigns you get to show people what you have done for the town,” Connors said. “Admittedly, I have had a very smooth race for mayor these last few times because I haven’t been opposed. But that shouldn’t be a safeguard. Competition is good, in my view, because it is the only way to keep (towns) moving forward and incumbents on their toes.”

Even finding potential candidates in New Jersey’s beachfront municipalities, such as those on Long Beach Island, is often impossible at best, due to the small year-round populations in those communities. The four Long Beach Island municipalities with uncontested races on this year’s ballot — Barnegat Light, Harvey Cedars, Ship Bottom and Surf City — all have populations of less than 1,250, the most recent U.S. Census data show.

“If you look at Ocean County, 98 percent of the population has an opportunity to vote for a (Democratic) candidate in their town this year. But in the micro towns, like the ones on Long Beach Island that are mostly Republican, people are often reluctant to run against their neighbors,” said Marta Harrison, vice chairwoman of the Ocean County Democratic Committee. “The decision on whether or not to run is a very personal one. And people really do not want to run against people they know and where they can get involved in any sort of controversy.”

Still, some say the low candidate turnout is just a sign of the times.

“I think it is a function of the economy. The issue is a lot of these positions come with a very small stipend or are unpaid, but they take up an enormous amount of people’s time,” said Matthew Weng, a staff attorney for the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. “And in these economic times, it is a huge commitment to devote that time to volunteer for a local office, because it takes away from your opportunities to work a real job and make money to support your family.”

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