



The Star-Ledger

Democrats bring cash edge to campaign in 18th District

Sunday, October 28, 2007

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The names on the Democratic slate in the 18th District legislative race may look the same as in the last election, but there's actually a new face on the ticket.

The addition is Peter Barnes, a former Edison councilman, who was appointed to the Assembly a few months ago when his father, Peter Barnes Jr., left the Legislature to become chairman of the state parole board.

The younger Barnes joins state Sen. Barbara Buono and Assemblyman Patrick Diegnan on the Democratic ticket.

They face off Nov. 6 against Republican Senate candidate Daniel Brown and Assembly candidates William England and Joseph Sinagra.

The Democratic incumbents have raised more than \$500,000 for the race and have used their financial edge to buy cable television campaign commercials.

The GOP candidates have less than \$10,000 in their war chest and have had to rely on appearances at parades and forums and knocking on doors to get out their message.

The district includes East Brunswick, Edison, Helmetta, Metuchen, South Plainfield, South River and Spotswood.

As a main plank in their platform, the Republicans proposed reorganizing the state's school districts in a consolidation that would leave only those districts that offer kindergarten through 12th grade instruction. The Republicans said this would eliminate the unnecessary staff for 200 districts that have one or no schools.

"The only practical way to assure people tax reform is to reduce spending," said Brown, the GOP Senate candidate, who unsuccessfully ran for East Brunswick council in 2004.

"New Jersey does not need a new spending plan," said Sinagra. "What we need is a new savings plan."

England also proposed a tiered salary guide for all teachers and administrators in the state to create a uniform pay schedule. England is a school board member in South River, but said he would resign the post if he is elected.

The GOP trio also favors ethics reform and elimination of all the so-called "Christmas tree" items added to the state budget each year by lawmakers. Brown said state officials must be made to justify every expenditure.

Democrat Diegnan criticized the Republicans' message as short on ways to improve the quality of life for residents.

"I don't think Republicans are addressing tomorrow as much as Democratic candidates," he said. For instance, he said the Democrats support stem cell research.

The tax burden is the toughest issue facing the state, Barnes said. He said the sales, income and property taxes must be examined and the best solution would probably combine reforms in each category.

Although Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine is working on a plan to raise funds for state government from higher tolls, Barnes said he is against any plan that would surrender control of the Turnpike and other toll roads.

Barnes said he has knocked on thousands of doors in his campaign. "I feel I have to go the extra step because I am new," he said.

Buono said that if re-elected, she would push legislation for an elected comptroller to provide more scrutiny of state spending. "If we're serious about eliminating waste and fraud we need more checks and balances," Buono said.

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