



## The Star-Ledger

### Candidates allege conflict in land sale

Foes say Diegnan helped a campaign contributor

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Republican candidates running for the District 18 Assembly seats have accused Democratic incumbent Patrick Diegnan of helping engineer a sweetheart land deal for a campaign contributor in his hometown of South Plainfield.

GOP nominees William England and Joseph Sinagra are questioning the sale of a property at the corner of St. John's Place and Tremont Avenue to a corporation controlled by Joseph DeAndrea and his brother Richard.

South Plainfield officials negotiated the land deal with the brothers. The DeAndreas put down \$97,000 in cash and traded another strip valued at \$80,000 that South Plainfield wanted for a road project. Diegnan, who is seeking a fourth term, worked on the sale as borough counsel. He is also chairman of the South Plainfield Democratic Organization.

Since Diegnan first ran for the Legislature in 2001, Joseph DeAndrea donated \$5,250 to his campaigns through New Era Development Inc., a corporation that lists DeAndrea as president. This year, the same firm also contributed \$450 to the borough Democratic organization.

"It appears to me from an ethical standpoint, there's a definite conflict of interest," said Sinagra, a former Helmetta council president who works as a facilities manager. He argued Diegnan should have removed himself from all involvement in the transaction.

Diegnan said he was outraged the GOP candidates questioned his integrity.

"I find it personally insulting," he said. "I'm never going to give somebody a benefit over a \$200 campaign contribution."

Diegnan, the longtime borough attorney, said the sale to the DeAndreas was a "detached, arm's-length transaction."

Mayor Charles Butrico, a Democrat, and the council, which is also controlled by his party, approved the sale to the DeAndreas last month, on the same night four other lots in the neighborhood were auctioned off. All five lots measured about 100 feet by 100 feet. While one lot did not sell, the three others were auctioned off for between \$225,000 and \$275,000.

All the lots were appraised by Fleming White Appraisals of Woodbridge. Carl Fleming, the principal consultant in the firm, appraised DeAndrea's lot in February and valued it at \$177,500. The other properties were appraised four months later and they were valued higher. Fleming appraised three of the lots at \$235,000 and one for \$220,000. The lot valued at \$220,000, adjacent to DeAndrea's parcel, did not sell.

England, a South River school board member running for Assembly on the GOP ticket, said roads were extended in the neighborhood since the winter and taxpayers would have benefited from a more up-to-date appraisal.

But Butrico said the borough was already in negotiation with the DeAndreas for months and wanted to finalize the sale so South Plainfield could acquire the strip of land outside the DeAndreas' business on South Clinton Avenue for a separate road project.

"I am a man of my word," Butrico said. "We worked out a deal. I never go back on things I say. I wasn't going to pull the plug at the last minute and say I want more money."

Richard DeAndrea refuted the Republicans' claim that his firm got preferential treatment in the sale. He said he made a large concession to the town trading property outside his business.

"We devalued the corner," DeAndrea said. The businessman also argued the land he acquired on Tremont was "unimproved," while the lots that sold for higher prices were "ready to build" with sewer lines and utilities available on site.

Diegnan said he had nothing to do with setting the value of the lands sold by the borough. It was a mathematical calculation done by Fleming, Diegnan said.

"My job was to finalize the legal aspects and that's what I did. I prepared the documents for the legal exchange," he said.

"I'm outraged that every two years me and a lot of other people in this state have to put up with this baloney," Diegnan said, referring to the two-year election cycles for Assembly seats. "I find it personally insulting. You should ask the Republicans for a reason why people should elect them."

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