

Somerset County

Dem shake-up in Franklin

County committee challengers seek to oust party leader

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FRANKLIN — The township's Democratic Party needs new leadership, said a group of dissatisfied Democrats who hope to unseat the county committee's longtime chairman in June.

A dozen candidates from the Reformed Democrats of Franklin Township have filed to run for county committee seats in the June primary, a move disgruntled committee members called a strategy to replace Chairman Bill Grippo with a new leader. Grippo, chairman of the committee for the past six years, has been at the helm for too long, they said.

"The Democrats in our town have had enough with the runaway train the higher-level management have become," said committee member and former Planning Board member Joe Danielson. "The current leadership in the party, in the opinion of many, must go."

Grippo said he was unaware of any organized effort to alter the party's leadership and added he has many supporters who appreciate the work he's done over the years. He hopes to complete at least one more term as chairman, he said.

"Every once in a while I guess other people like to take a shot at things," Grippo said when asked about the group of reform candidates. "We do have open government."

To oust Grippo, a majority of members — the committee is made up of 98 seats from 49 districts — must agree on a new chair. Besides the dozen reform candidates, enough incumbents will vote to unseat Grippo, said those leading the effort.

Danielson and other committee candidates said party leaders' communication has been lacking the past few years and decisions have been made by only a select few.

"Even executive members of the party are not privy to decisions until long after they've been made," Danielson said. "The end result is an explosion of taxes and development."

Township Council and committee member Brian Regan said Grippo has done a good job over the years, but agreed it's time for a change.

"The current leadership is not inclusive," Regan said. "Bill has made decisions on his own without getting input from other committee members. We're looking to have a leadership that's going to be inclusive."

Councilman Jim Vassanella said he also supports a change.

"Bill has taken the power of the chairman to extreme limits," Vassanella said. "You need a chairman or chairwoman, but you also need an inclusive, hard-working and diverse group in which all members have a say."

But Grippo said his communication with other members and township officials has always been good. The

Democratic Party is a party of the people and those they elect, added Grippo, not a party of the municipal chair.

"I've always provided strength and stability and unity to the party," he said. "Sometimes that's intimidating."

Reform candidate Joel Mintz said the majority of Democrats are unhappy with Grippo, adding that the controversy over the Bennetts Lane and Veronica Avenue development was "the straw that broke the camel's back."

The disputed project was added to Franklin's affordable housing plan last year after months of opposition from residents who worried that added homes in the area would increase traffic, endanger area wildlife and wetlands and take away from their quality of life.

"The vast majority of party members as well as the public at large opposed this development," Mintz said. "It was shoved down our throats."

Reform candidate Phil Kramer, director of Taxpayers United in Franklin, said many Democrats think Grippo has too much influence over council members' decisions. All eight members of the Township Council are Democrats; Mayor Brian Levine is a Republican.

Kramer's wife, Laurie, is running for a committee seat in District 3.

Grippo said he wants to be chair for one more term to help usher in a Democratic mayor. He welcomes any constructive comments about himself and the Democratic Party, he said.

"We all need to change and grow," Grippo said. "I would hope though we would continue to be one big, happy family."

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