

Mayoral hopeful's residency raises eligibility questions

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FRANKLIN (Somerset) -- Deputy Mayor Wandra Ashley-Williams will run for mayor in next year's election despite growing concerns over her residency following the sale of her Franklin Park condominium to pursue a job in Washington, D.C., two months ago.

"Franklin is growing considerably, and I believe we need true leadership in this town that I can give," Ashley-Williams said. "With my experience, I feel that I can make a difference."



Democrat Ashley-Williams, 56, told township officials she is living in the 100 block of Girard Avenue in Franklin, Somerset County, after selling her condominium at 22 Sapphire Lane. She makes regular commutes to Washington, D.C., where she works for the D.C. Department of Corrections and has a residence as well.

The decision has come under scrutiny in recent weeks as Ashley-Williams has missed the last two council meetings and two special budget work sessions, according to the township clerk, causing her detractors to question her dedication to the township.

Ashley-Williams defended her absences, saying she routinely misses meetings during the slower July and August months for the NAACP convention (she is a former president of the New Brunswick branch) and a personal vacation.

"I do not see how my move will cause any problems," said Ashley-Williams, who was elected in 2003 to a four-year term. "What we have here is a lot of people making comments about things they know nothing about."

Ashley-Williams missed two meetings in each of the past two years, both in July and August.

Robert LaCorte, municipal chair of the Republican Party in Franklin, said in a letter to the Taxpayers United of Franklin that the Township Council should investigate Ashley-Williams' residency to determine if she does indeed live in the township and act accordingly. LaCorte, though, is fearful the Democrat-controlled council will not act because of party affiliation.

"In the interest of fairness and for the benefit of the citizens of Franklin Township, the Franklin Township Republicans hope that the Democrats do the right thing," he wrote.

Louis Rainone, township attorney, said state law is open to debate on the question of residency. He said that, while a person may have several or more homes, residency is determined by what a person considers to be one's "domicile."

"There is a lot of gray area, but it comes down to what a person considers their home," Rainone said. "They may spend the majority of their time physically living in another location, but if they consider their home somewhere else then that is what we go on."

Rainone said there are no mandates on the amount of time a person must spend at a home to be considered a resident. He said the Township Council has no authority to boot a person from office on these grounds, although the governing body can formally ask for a resignation.

Ashley-Williams said in a previous interview she will be wherever her schedule dictates and is dedicated to the residents of the township. She said she is currently studying the township's proposed budget and trying to get aid for the family of 15-year-old Terrell Spruill, who was murdered Aug. 10 two blocks from his Parkside home.

Republican Mayor Brian Levine, who has not decided whether to seek re-election, said whoever his potential opponent is in the election will not affect his decision to run.

"I just hope that whoever runs for the office can serve the town appropriately in both terms of time and with the philosophy of putting the township first," Levine said.

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