

# Franklin official bounced in recall

## Councilwoman loses seat to former mayor

**BY NYIER ABDU**  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Voters in Franklin Township's 3rd Ward yesterday ousted Deputy Mayor Ellen Ritchie in Somerset County's first recall election, replacing the first-term councilwoman with Republican candidate and former Mayor Robert Mettler.

The two-part referendum asked voters whether to remove Ritchie from office and to choose among three candidates, including Ritchie. The recall passed

1,165 to 291 votes, and Mettler won an 11-vote victory over Democratic candidate and planning board Vice Chairman Michael Orsini to replace Ritchie.



**RITCHIE**

Mettler garnered 625 votes, while Orsini, who actively collected petition signatures for the recall campaign, tallied 614. Ritchie, who served 18 years as Franklin's township planner, ran as an independent and received 213 votes, according to township clerk Ann Marie McCarthy.

Mettler's narrow victory means Republican Mayor Brian Levine now has "at least one ally" on the nine-member township council. Mettler, who served more than two decades as an at-large councilman and serves on the planning board, said he is looking forward to being back.

"It will feel very nice," Mettler said last night, while celebrating at O'Connor's restaurant in the Somerset section of the township. "I really do love Franklin."

Ritchie could not be reached last night.

Of the 6,067 registered voters in Franklin's 3rd Ward, 1,444 cast bal

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HOW'S TRAFFIC?  
VOTE - SEPT. 11  
RECALL RITCHIE  
STOP  
OVER-  
DEVELOPMENT



MATT RAINEY THE STAR-LEDGER

Joseph Danielsen hoists a "Recall Ritchie" sign along Route 27.

# RECALL

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## Franklin Twp. voters oust councilwoman

lots yesterday, and there were 37 absentee ballots.

Ritchie, who was appointed to the 3rd Ward council seat in 2004, was elected to a full four-year term the following year. Nearly a year later, however, a bipartisan group of activists launched a recall campaign fueled by anger over Ritchie's controversial support for a large, mixed-use development proposed by Middlesex County builder and influential Democrat Jack Morris.

Orsini said Mettler will represent residents well, and the recall was "the most important issue."

"I can't emphasize enough how thrilled I am that the recall passed," Orsini said. "Both parties are talking to each other. There's an atmosphere where I think the township will be better served."

"I'm extremely gratified," said recall committee member Phil Kramer. "It wasn't a landslide, it was a tsunami."

The Morris plan — which calls for more than 600 units of housing and a retail complex with a Home Depot off Route 27, between Ben-

netts Lane and Veronica Avenue — was voted off and back on the township's affordable-housing plan while Ritchie served on the planning board and township council.

Orsini, who voted against the project, later had a public exchange with Ritchie after the decision. She told him his political career would be ruined.

Ritchie defended the project, saying the township was open to threats of legal action and needed the affordable housing component offered by the developer.

But many residents disagreed. Recall supporters went door-to-door with petitions, eventually gathering the required number of signatures to force yesterday's election.

Mettler said he felt the recall was "really a referendum on Jack Morris."

Yesterday, Kramer, who also co-founded the local government watchdog, Taxpayers United in Franklin Township, was out in the rain with other activists hoisting "Recall Ritchie" signs on the side of Route 27 during the morning and evening rush hours.

Many heeded the call, saying they wanted to send a message to politicians that residents don't appreciate overdevelopment.

Residents Joseph and Barbara Wright said they moved to Franklin

20 years ago for its "rural atmosphere" but are saddened by overdevelopment.

"Look at this beautiful town and what it's become," said Joseph Wright, as he left a polling station at the township's Community Senior Center yesterday. "God's not making any more land."

"She supports business, not the residents," Barbara Wright said of Ritchie.

Resident Michael Rothberg, an EMT, said Ritchie's maneuvering on the Morris project had the "appearance of impropriety."

"I feel passionately about this recall," Rothberg said. "When elected officials forget they are there to serve and think the people serve them, then it's time for them to leave."

"Just because (Franklin) gets big, doesn't mean people stop paying attention," resident Bob Bertolatus said.

Municipal Republican Chairman Bob LaCorte said the election bodes well for his party in the next election. "The people of Franklin have spoken louder than ever before in Somerset County, and they said enough is enough," LaCorte said. "This message should be heard around the state."

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