



Resident suspects pay to play in Deptford

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DEPTFORD TWP. When Mickey Walker first approached the Deptford Township council with a plan to end pay-to-play practices in the township, he said he was turned away.

Now two years later Walker is trying to put the decision in the hands of the voters.

"I am optimistic on the participation of the citizens of Deptford; pay to play makes a difference," the 61-year-old Deptford resident said. "The big issue here is to control the campaign contributions because ultimately these contributions are recouped."

Pay to play is the practice in which professionals make campaign contributions in order to be awarded future no-bid public contracts for professional services. Many reformers believe the cost of those campaign contributions gets factored into the prices professionals build into public contracts. So, the public ends up paying more for public service to help cover the campaign contributions.

Critics say pay to play is a round-about way incumbents use to channel taxpayer dollars intended for public services back into their own political campaigns.

The issue grabbed Walker's attention when he noticed that two major campaign contributors, the engineering firms of Richard Alaimo Associates and Federici and Akin, were later awarded municipal contracts in Deptford.

Despite Walker's suspicions, Mayor Paul Medany explained that Deptford does not have an issue with pay to play.

"There is no pay to play in Deptford," Medany explained. "We hire our professionals by the fair and open process."

The municipality puts out a request for qualifications that is advertised. Once the deadline for submissions expires, the council opens them in a public meeting before awarding the bid to the most qualified candidate.

"You want to get the most qualified person, that is why you go out to bid," Medany explained. "We want the people who can do the job, we are a big township, this is a big job."

Still, Walker sees enough evidence to bring the issue before the council once again. He intends to collect 782 signatures from Deptford voters on a petition before a self-imposed deadline of June 1.

If the council doesn't act on the petition with an appropriate ordinance governing pay to play, then the issue can go before the voters this November as a referendum on the ballot.

"Bottom line, if I do it on June 1st, if there are any glitches or hitches on the way, it gives us time to correct any problems and get it on the November ballot," Walker said.

Until then, Walker and a group of bipartisan petitioners are taking their fight to the streets in an effort to collect enough signatures to meet the threshold of 10 percent of the voters in Deptford Township who voted in the last general election.

Walker already has one-third of the 782 signatures needed for his petition to be eligible.

"You literally have to go door-to-door," Walker explained, optimistically adding, "no one has said no to me."

A self-described "news junkie" with a six newspaper-a-day habit, Walker always had an interest in politics, but it wasn't until he retired in 2004 that he had time to do something about it.

Thumbing through stacks of election contribution reports, Walker read off numbers illustrating evidence of a pay to play issue in the township.

According to 2005 election reports, Federici and Akin contributed a total of \$14,800 in primary and general election campaign funds to township Democrats. Richard Alaimo Associates signed over two checks, one for \$8,800 and one for \$8,000 to township Democrats in the primary and general elections. Both were

awarded professional contracts in the coming years.

"I have gone through many of these things, this is just the tip of the iceberg," he said. "Countless hours, hundreds, but that is what you have to do to find out what is going on."

Although the two engineering firms were campaign contributors, so were countless others, many whom didn't receive municipal contracts, Medany explained.

"There were surely other firms that were campaign contributors that didn't get appointed," Medany explained. "It is all transparent, contributing the campaign in 2005 doesn't mean you get a job."

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