



Peterson joins Christy, Swift in Cumberland race

■ The independent Democratic slate of former Cumberland County freeholders seeks to unseat Lou Magazzu and his slate.

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Former Cumberland County Freeholder Bruce Peterson joined a slate of former freeholders leading a Democratic revolt against Freeholder Director Lou Magazzu this year.

Peterson, who left the board last summer and is now mayor of Upper Deerfield Township, picked up petitions Wednesday to circulate so he can be on the ballot for freeholder as an independent Democrat.

He will run for a one-year unexpired term against Democrat Nelson Thompson, who was appointed to the seat in January, and Republican businessman Sam Fiocchi.

But those names aren't the big targets. In joining the ticket of former Democratic Freeholders Jane Christy and Jennifer Swift, Peterson has helped place a bull's eye on Magazzu, the county Democratic chairman who leads an all-Democrat freeholder board with comparatively little experience.

Swift, who changed her surname from Lookabaugh after remarrying, is a former freeholder director. Peterson and Christy both served as deputy directors. They have more collective freeholder experience than all seven freeholders combined.

It's an independent slate with so much experience, that longtime New Jersey politics watchers may have never seen its kind before.

"The short answer is, I haven't heard of it, but I don't know," said Ben Dworkin, director of Rider University's Rebovich Institute for NJ Politics.

"I can't remember a slate ever doing that, especially since they're all former freeholders," said Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. "That's a powerful slate. That's a very powerful slate. They've got a lot of people that will follow them just because it's them. They had very good reputations."

Peterson served three terms on the Board of Freeholders before resigning last summer to fill a seat on the Upper Deerfield Township Com-

mittee. His freeholder term was set to expire at year's end, and he had already decided not to run for re-election.

The civility, cooperation and efficiency he experienced on Upper Deerfield Township's bipartisan committee marked a stark contrast from the county government, Peterson said.

"It just drove home a point for me over time that there's a problem at the county level," he said.

Like Swift and Christy, he expressed concern about mistreatment of county employees, and he criticized the delayed review of the Cumberland County Technical Education Center's transition to full-time status.

Although he did not mention Magazzu by name, his points echoed his running mates' criticisms, which did.

"We just need to bring back civility to the county (government)," Peterson said. "There's things that just aren't getting done. The kids are just hanging out waiting for the technical school."

Magazzu declined to answer questions Wednesday, choosing instead to issue a written statement touting his virtues. He cited the board's move to cut the county apportionment rate this year and a cut to the county tax levy for the first time in years, an issue that dominated last year's freeholder campaign, with both Republicans and Democrats advocating it.

"We look forward to a vigorous debate not about personality and style, but about substance, accomplishments and a shared vision for the future," Magazzu said in the statement.

On many other points, the same issues that Magazzu would tout as successes can be claimed by Peterson and Christy, who served with Magazzu from 2003 through 2008, during the county's massive economic growth. They also backed most of the budgets that led to a doubling of the county budget during that time.

However, they proved to be

his most consistent opposition, more vocal and influential than the three Republicans who sat on the board during that time.

For example, they led the push to stop Magazzu's attempt in late 2004 to take over the Cumberland County Improvement Authority, which was flush with reserves while the county government was struggling.

Similarly, the independent slate opposes what they view as a renewed attempt by Magazzu to control the authority by replacing the CCI's board members with new members hostile to CCI Executive Director Steve Wymbs and loyal to Magazzu.

After Magazzu called for the discontinuation of the county's marketing program — at a time when neighboring Salem County was initiating a similar effort — Christy questioned whether the move was driven by the desire to prevent consultant Lee Tofanelli, a Magazzu antagonist, from obtaining the contract once again.

On Election Day, however, Peterson, Christy and Swift won't only be facing Magazzu, Thompson and Bridgeton businessman Wade Sjogren.

Lawrence Township Mayor Tom Sheppard, former Vineland Solicitor Rick Tonetta and Fiocchi are running on the Republican slate, and former Vineland City Councilwoman Sheena Santiago announced her independent candidacy Monday. Sheppard thinks the Democratic infighting can only help his slate.

"It's a free-for-all," said Sheppard, the business manager of Sheppard Farms, arguably New Jersey's biggest vegetable farm. "From a political point of view, if Democrats split the votes between the county Democratic Party and (Christy, Peterson and Swift), then that helps us. They're going to draw votes that would've gone to (Magazzu's slate.)"

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