



Azzolina says he'll continue re-election bid

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APRIL 27 - The truce, if there really was one, is over and the GOP primary race is on in the 13th District.

Two weeks after meeting with party leaders and agreeing to a "cooling off" period, Assemblyman Joseph Azzolina launched a salvo late Tuesday at Amy Handlin, using a press release to rip the Monmouth County freeholder for her support of a ban on county workers holding elected office.

The move signaled that Azzolina, who swore off running in the primary after he lost to Handlin at the Monmouth County Republican convention and then changed his mind two days later, is committed to fighting for the Assembly seat he's held on and off for 40 years.

"It's going to be tough," Azzolina said today of the three-way primary race in which he will not enjoy organizational backing in the larger of the district's two counties. "It's not easy when you're not on a line. But I'll tell you one thing: I've been getting a lot of encouragement from people who think I got screwed."

He said he didn't talk to Fred Niemann and Dan Gallic, the Monmouth Republican leaders who had asked him to agree to the temporary truce with the hope that he might reconsider his decision to run.

Since there are two spots at stake in the primary, Handlin is technically challenging both incumbents, Azzolina and Sam Thompson. Both men barely the November 2003 general election, a showing that was blamed more on Azzolina than Thompson. Monmouth GOP leaders recruited Handlin specifically to challenge Azzolina, a move that had the backing of state Republicans, who fear a Democratic takeover of the 13th District seats.

"As far as I'm concerned, I hope Sam wins" one of the two spots, Azzolina said.

Handlin, who has been a freeholder since 1989, said Azzolina's decision to go forward didn't surprise her and wouldn't affect her strategy. Decades younger than both incumbents, she is pitching herself as a fresh-faced reformer.

Monmouth County, where about 70 percent of the district's voters live, is the latest epicenter in U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie's corruption crackdown. Just this afternoon, Harry Larrison Jr. — whose four decades of service on the freeholder board earned him the unofficial title "governor of Monmouth County" — was charged by Christie with taking cash bribes from a developer.

"There is a graphic need for new voices and new ideas in Trenton to try to get at the most egregious ills in all of New Jersey," Handlin, a 16-year freeholder, said.

By criticizing her for supporting a ban on county workers holding office, Azzolina, Handlin said, "made a statement that this is status quo versus radical change. And he represents the status quo while I stand for radical change, and we will let the voters decide."

The only female on the five-member, all-Republican freeholder board, Handin has often pursued her own agenda. Indeed, some Monmouth insiders have suggested that the GOP

leaders who recruited Handlin this year were at least partially motivated by a desire to remove her from the board.

In addition to a handful of Monmouth towns, the 13th also includes the large Middlesex community of Old Bridge, which accounts for about 30 percent of the district's population. Azzolina and Handlin are from Monmouth while Thompson lives in Old Bridge.

The primary will be unique because each county's GOP line is different. Middlesex Republicans held their convention first, unanimously endorsing Azzolina and Thompson. Handlin did not contest that vote. A week later, Monmouth Republicans picked Handlin and Thompson, with party leaders tossing a twist into the convention proceedings.

After the candidates spoke, Dan Gallic, the Monmouth GOP's executive director, asked them to take a public pledge not to contest the primary if they lost at the convention. They all agreed to, but Azzolina says he was sandbagged.

"They weren't supposed to ask that," he said. "They snuck that in at the last minute"

Azzolina also noted that Gallic and Fred Niemann, the county GOP chairman, were among the only people who witnessed the closed-door vote tabulations that day. The results were never released.

"So how do I know what it was? And he was against me, too," Azzolina said, referring to Niemann, who had supported Handlin.

Still, Azzolina insists he intended to drop out of the race until the following Monday morning, when Middlesex's Republican chairman, Joe Leo, informed him that Handlin had turned down a chance to take Azzolina's place on that county's line. Leo then offered it Azzolina, who accepted.

Handlin, however, has said she was never asked directly by Leo to run on the line. She had struck a deal to run on a slate with gubernatorial candidate Doug Forrester after the Middlesex convention, believing, she said, that Azzolina would stay in the race no matter what happened in Monmouth.

"I fully didn't intend to run," Azzolina said today. "But then when I found out what happened with the voting machines and then with what happened in Middlesex, I figured it was my obligation to run. And I'm a serious candidate."

Azzolina has about \$150,000 in campaign funds, much of it raised years ago, and he is expected to outspend Handlin. His high name recognition figures to off-set some of the liabilities that come with not having the line in Monmouth, but there are questions about Azzolina's political strength in Middletown, his hometown and the largest municipality in the district.

Azzolina dismissed it, but some insiders have advanced the notion that Thompson could be the odd man out if voters in Monmouth opt to vote for both of their home-county candidates.

Thompson said he doesn't want to pick sides.

"Running on the line with Amy in Monmouth County, it would be inappropriate for me to turn around and try to bang her," he said. "And in Middlesex I'm running on the line with Joe, so it wouldn't be appropriate for me to bang him either."