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NEWS

Unger Aces Long Branch Election Race 'a referendum on eminent domain'

By Matt Lynch

LONG BRANCH - Like a gambler with a solid feel for the cards at the table, in his campaign for council Brian Unger went all-in on the issue of eminent domain. While the perceived front-runner, Council-woman Jackeline Biddle said that there were more pressing issues facing the candidates, Unger strove to make this race a referendum on the city's divisive use of eminent domain during the ongoing ambitious redevelopment.

When the cards were flipped over Tuesday evening, it was evident that Unger's bet paid off in spades.

Out of a crowded field of five seeking to fill the final three years of former Councilman John "Fazz" Zambrano's unexpired council term, Unger emerged with a stunningly wide margin of victory. Unofficially, Unger, 54, received 43 percent of the vote or 1,836 votes (These figures do not include provisional ballots). His closest competitor received 1,157 votes.

"My political instincts told me that this election was a referendum on the direction the city was going in," Unger said seated inside an all but empty Nunzio's Restaurant late Tuesday. "It really boiled down to a question of does the administration get to appoint its own fifth city council person giving them a five to zero majority or do the people get to elect someone who is independent and is opposed to some key city policies especially eminent domain."

Councilwoman Biddle who was appointed by the governing body to fill Zambrano's seat after he resigned this summer after admitting that he had accepted a bribe, finished a distant second with 1,157 votes or 27 percent of votes cast.

Michael Sirianni, a lifelong Long Branch resident and a school principal, finished third with 607 votes.

Though he had stated repeatedly that the seat should rightfully be his after finishing first runner-up in the May general election, Ralph DeFillipo finished with a modest 458 votes.

Retired Long Branch police officer Vincent Maccioli garnered but 257 votes.

Messages left at Biddle's office, home and an email seeking comment through her campaign were not returned as of press time.

When reached after the results became public Tuesday, DeFillipo showed a mix of resignation and relief. "I took a beating didn't I," he said. "The people made their choice. They gave me something I can live with... losing ain't so bad; not when you have things to do like I do."

DeFillipo said he will remain a presence at council meetings, however first on his agenda is some fishing.

Unger was asked what had changed in the months since the May general election. At the time, though Mayor Adam Schneider would not say so, the reelection of the entire Schneider Team was widely viewed as a confirmation of the city's redevelopment plan. Perhaps, it was thought, the average city voter cared more about taxes, crime and quality of life issues than the comings and goings in MTOTSA and the future of the Broadway business corridor.

Unger believes that because this race was only for a single seat on council, the risks of sending a signal were not as great as in the May general election. "It was one council vote," Unger, a resident of the city's Elberon section said. "It wasn't the entire city council... in that sense there was a lot of symbolism involved."

Though it may divide a portion of the community, a superior court judge upheld the city's use of eminent domain in June. This ruling has been appealed.

The councilman elect cautioned those fighting eminent domain to not expect overnight results with his election. Contracts have been signed. A legal conflict is still working its way through the courts.

"This issue of eminent domain being used on a homeowner neighborhood is emotionally charged," Unger said. "It's constitutionally charged. It's ideologically charged. It's not going to be over at the next council meeting or even after that."

Ultimately, ideally, Unger said he would like to see the MTOTSA neighborhood taken out of the redevelopment zone. "It's

important to explore that... because this is dividing our city and our people right down the middle," he added. With that, the interview ended. Unger had a call to take.

It is son calling from college.

"Hey," Unger said walking away. "I won."

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