

Accusations fly in Readington race

READINGTON TWP. - The heat has been turned up in the campaign for two seats available this November on the Township Committee, after Julia Allen, who lost in this June's Republican primary race to first-time candidate James Hunter, has returned as a write-in candidate.

Since Allen announced her intention to run as a write-in candidate on Monday, Sept. 12, again turning the election into three-way race for the two positions on the committee, accusations and counter-accusations have flown between the long-time committeewoman and Hunter, a newcomer to local politics.

Mayor Frank Gatti, who is also a Republican, was the top vote getter in the June primary with 1,187 votes. He said on Monday he is confident he can win one of the three-year seats available on the Township Committee. Hunter received 1,130 votes in the election to edge out Allen's vote count of 1,068.

Allen's name will not appear on the ballot on Tuesday, Nov. 7.

But she said on Monday that poll workers can assist residents in casting a write-in vote.

Others are obtaining absentee ballots and filling them out beforehand. This year, for the first time, the polling laws do not require a voter to actually be

out of town to cast an absentee ballot, she noted.

Allen, a longtime champion of open space preservation, is casting Hunter as a developer with some past deals that impugn his integrity.

Allen said she initially accepted the narrow loss of the primary election in June, but then many people urged her to run as an independent write-in so she could continue in her position on the Township Committee.

Hunter said that hunter-record.com, a Web site devoted to outlining Hunter's past, called the Web site, "an act of total

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Allen said the longstanding lawsuit only shows how high the stakes have become for developers, whom she said support her opponent, James Hunter.

She calculated the average tax bill of \$8,840 on a township home allocates \$5,700 to the local and high school systems, an amount she said would only skyrocket if rapid development continued, and more school-children moved into the township.

About \$1,600 goes to the county, \$1,200 to fund the municipal budget and another \$200 is set aside for open space funding, she said.

Of the municipal amount, about \$100 of taxes on that average home goes towards paying for zoning litigation, Allen said.

"That's pennies on the dollar compared to the alternative, which is unbridled growth," Allen said.

The growth rate in Readington has dropped dramatically in the past 10 years, most of which Allen has spent in office. She said 500 certificates of occupancy were issued for new homes in 1995, compared with 13 certificates of occupancy in 2004.

Nevertheless, Allen said that the township has brought in "high quality ratables," such as Merck & Co. and the Chubb Corp., which moved in during 2003.

Readington is also working on redeveloping Route 22, bringing Wal-Mart into the abandoned Laneco building a little more than a year ago.

Arrangements involving housing for older adults have helped satisfy Readington's obligation for affordable housing as set by the state Council on Affordable Housing (COAH). She said a pro-active stance by Readington officials, herself included, has resulted in a good relationship with COAH and an avoidance of developers' lawsuits and orders from COAH, which have troubled neighboring municipalities.

As far as preserving land, Allen said the municipality has fully taken advantage of such programs as the Garden State Trust Fund for preserving farmland and open space. The township's policy has been to buy land when it is available and seek reimbursement afterwards, she said.

Allen served as mayor in 1999 and 2004, on the township Planning Board from 1984-95 and from 1999 to present, and on the Township Committee since 1997.

She has served on numerous township boards and committees since entering Readington politics in the 1970's.

She is also a member of several environmentally oriented groups, including the Audubon Society, Hunterdon Land Trust Alliance and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Her awards include a distinguished leadership award for an elected official from the American Planning Association in 2001.

She is 62, and is married to Richard Allen. She has five children and 10 grandchildren.

She holds a bachelor of science degree in chemistry from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She was a chemist at the National Institute of Health in Washington, D.C. and a former teacher.

FRANK GATTI

Frank Gatti, selected by the Township Committee to serve as this year's mayor, was top vote getter in the June 7 Republican primary election.

Right now, Gatti is working on negotiations for a settlement with Solberg Airport that would be an alternative to the acerbic relationship between the airport owners and township as the township, and later the state, attempted to take over the airport to keep it from expanding.

Gatti said he and other members of the committee, including Allen, are working on negotiating to buy development rights to the airport, which is largely surrounded by open space.

Gatti is wrapping up his second three-year term on the committee. He has also been involved in land preservation, and he noted that about 1,500 more acres has been preserved since he took office in 2000.

Gatti was also previously mayor in 2003. He has been instrumental in the selection of the police chief, the establishment of the township's Museum Committee and opening those museums to the public. He also volunteered to help restore the museums.

"I have been accessible to the public and have helped many residents with their issues," he said during the primary campaign last May.

Gatti said then he was seeking re-election because "the township finds itself at the crossroads of what its future will be, because of builders who are trying to break our zoning and suburbanize our township." He said he is trying to "maintain the quality of life here in

Readington."

Keeping property taxes steady by controlling spending and working at the state level to push property tax reform is another major issue, said Gatti.

The strategy of farmland preservation and seeking to preserve open space and slow development will stabilize the tax rate, he said. "The high legal bills are the results of the stakes getting higher for the builders, and running up high legal bills seems to be a strategy for builders."

He said he would like to see the establishment of more hiking trails so residents can take advantage of open space.

Gatti added he would like to see the Bank Street parking lot improved and parking issues resolved on Main Street in the Whitehouse Station section of the township. The township must also finalize its plans for meeting its affordable housing plan as set by the state Council on Affordable Housing, and work towards Smart Growth and redevelopment on Route 22 and Route 202.

Gatti is a member of the Planning Board, liaison to the Readington Township police, Historic Preservation Committee, the Museum Commission and the COAH subcommittee.

Gatti, 48, has lived in Whitehouse station for 14 years. He has a daughter, Kristen and wife, Terri.

He is financial consultant with his own financial consulting company, Wellington Associates, LLC. He has a bachelor of science degree in business and accounting from St. John's University, Queens, N.Y., and a master's degree in business administration in finance from Wagner College, Staten Island, N.Y.

JAMES HUNTER

As far as he is concerned, James Hunter, who along with Frank Gatti received the Republican nomination for two Township Committee seats up for re-election this November, said he has already won something for Readington Township residents.

Since he won the primary election in June, Hunter said the Township Committee, including Allen, have made more of an effort to distribute information to the community, even if he believes some of it is slanted.

"To me, this is a victory regardless," said Hunter, 34, a six-year resident of the township.

Hunter has steadfastly maintained that if he were on the Township Committee he would distribute as much information to the residents as possible, and would try to limit what is discussed by township officials behind closed doors in executive session.

Hunter spoke in favor of negotiating for acquiring development rights from the Solberg family, which owns Solberg Airport, rather than having the state or municipality attempt to buy and operate the facility.

"At this point, the Solbergs are willing to negotiate. It's a golden

opportunity."

Hunter also spoke of the deceptiveness of a legal account in this year's budget, which sets aside \$690,000 for legal fees. That amount has already been exceeded this year, as it was last year, when the excess amount for legal fees were transferred from other accounts at the end of the year.

The public loses in such transactions, he said.

"There's a lot of things out of bounds financially in Readington," Hunter said. He added, "Julia is the ringleader."

As owner of James Hunter Real Estate and Construction, Hunter nevertheless resists the portrait painted of him as a developer. He said the only home he has built in Readington was his own and that it sits on about five acres of property.

"I have a horse. I was a member of the Readington Trail Association. I have a barn," he said. He also owns Sebastiano's Italian Restaurant in Stewartville.

Hunter said he is also running for office because he appreciates living in Readington.

He added he attempted to sell the development rights to his 27 acres off School Road to the Township Committee to preserve the land.

After many months in the works, the deal was suddenly

dropped after he won the primary election, Hunter said.

Hunter denies the contention that he was conducting percolation tests on the property to prepare the land for its sale for development with seven houses.

He said the perc tests proved the land was worth more in setting its preservation value. He said he was willing to accept about \$1 million for the property rights.

The land is now on the market as an estate property to be developed by a single owner, he said.

Hunter said much has been twisted around during this election campaign.

Although he said the campaign has been stressful, he said he hopes his effort will make the township a better place to live.

Already, township officials are releasing more numbers on many issues, he said, at least bringing such topics up for discussion in a public forum.

Hunter said he was trying to track down the author of hunter-record.com. "I can legally and honestly dispute everything they say," Hunter maintained.

Hunter is a member of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, where he said one of his two daughters is a choir member.

A native of South Plainfield, Hunter said he attended technical schools for such trades as carpentry and mechanical skills.