

COUNTY

Quakertown schools

E-mails spark controversy

A candidate released messages from a Richland supervisor, who advised her, if elected, to follow the lead of school board member Paul Stepanoff.

BY CHRISTOPHER RUVO

THE INTELLIGENCER

Are a Richland official and two Quakertown school board members trying to stack the board with puppets who will vote the way they tell them to?

June Hunt isn't sure. But the school board candidate was suspicious enough to make public e-mails she says might suggest that's the case, including one in which Richland Supervisor Rick Orloff writes "if you did nothing else but show twice per month and vote on (board member Paul Stepanoff's) cue ... that's all we need."

Orloff sent the e-mails to Hunt in February in a bid to recruit her to run for school board on a team of "reform" candidates he supports. She rejected the offer, fearing she'd be beholden to him if elected.

The May 15 primary, in which 11 candidates are slugging it out in a heated bout for five seats on the school board, is just days away. Some say releasing the e-mails now stinks of low-down politics.

"It's all political. Look at the timing. She's trying to twist everything," said Lou-Ellen Renshaw, one of four school board candidates running on the reform team.

Hunt said she's getting the e-mails to the public because she wants voters to know there might be a hidden agenda at work. "You have to question why a township supervisor is so involved," she said.

Orloff said nothing "nefarious" is afoot.

"I along with other people had looked for candidates who would work for lower

for (Hunt) to be a rubber stamp."

In the e-mails, Orloff writes that Stepanoff and fellow board member Manuel Alfonso, who frequently clash with the rest of the board, need "three or better four or five more people to run and win. Nothing will change without new thinking."

He goes on to say that if Hunt can't keep up with board work, she can follow Stepanoff's lead when it comes time to vote. "As to the heavy lifting that might intimidate you, Paul (Stepanoff) is for all intents and purposes the guts of this whole effort," Orloff wrote.

Stepanoff said the e-mails are being taken out of context. "No way is it mandatory for anyone to vote like me and that was never implied — nothing could be further from the truth," he said.

Philip Abramson, one of three incumbents running for re-election who has come under heavy fire from Orloff and Stepanoff, said residents should consider the e-mails when voting.

"It looks like (Orloff) was trying to control the board," he said. "It should make voters ask, 'How much influence does he have over other (reform) candidates? Are they going to vote their own minds or the Orloff-Stepanoff mind?'"

Renshaw said Orloff has no pull with her or the other reform candidates, Thomas Marino, Dean Wackerman and George Dager.

"Rick doesn't speak for us. We speak for ourselves," she said. "None of us has even the vaguest feeling that we owe anybody anything. Nobody is going to sit there and say, 'Paul

wants us to do this' and then do it. We're individuals, and we're going to do what's best for the students and the community."

Renshaw said the reform candidates worked out their platform among themselves. At heart, they stand for better education at a reasonable tax rate, she said.

Hunt said she's glad she made the e-mails public. "I'm not telling voters what conclusion to come to, but ... I'll be able to sleep at night."

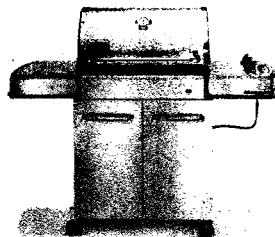
Last year, the board rejected an offer from Orloff to audit the district's finances. The contract could have earned him thousands of dollars.

Stepanoff and Orloff spearheaded an effort last fall to collect 1,400 signatures from community members in support of a plan they backed to abolish voting regions in the school district in favor of a system that would allow residents to vote on all nine school board seats, not just ones in their region.

The board backed keeping voting regions and realigning them. A Bucks County judge ruled in favor of that plan.

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