

Dems deny flier is campaign lit

Republicans say newsletter should focus on programs, not politicians

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Before each election, a publicly funded, nonprofit corporation called the Union County Alliance publishes a newsletter, packed with smiling politicians. The latest edition arrived at every Union County household days before last month's primary, featuring front-page photographs of Linden Mayor John Gregorio, Rahway Mayor James Kennedy and three county freeholders. All of them are Democrats. All are up for re-election.

The alliance is headed by Michael Murray, Union County's former director of public information, and receives more than \$250,000 annually from the all-Democratic county freeholder board. Each time the newsletter prints, local Republicans condemn it as Democratic campaign literature, subsidized by taxpayers.

"It's free advertising for their candidates," said Patricia Quattrocchi, a former GOP freeholder candidate.

For years, local Republicans have accused Democrats of taking advantage of their control over county government to win elections. They argue that by strategically featuring candidates in taxpayer-funded literature promoting programs and services, Democrats give themselves an unfair edge at the polls.

Democrats retort that publicity is the natural benefit of incumbency. They argue the programs touted through publications like The alliance's newsletter are administered by Democrats, and Democrats have every right to take credit. "If the Republicans don't like it, they have to start winning elections," said state Sen. Raymond J. Lesniak, Union County's highest ranking Democrat.

Last fall, Union County Republicans asked state officials to investigate whether Democrats violated campaign finance law by not reporting several publicly funded publications and broadcasts as political donations. A spokesman for the State Election Law Enforcement Commission declined to comment on the status of the request, citing agency policy.

The GOP complaint targeted a brochure and television commercial promoting county health programs and featured a freeholder up for re-election. The complaint also cited the alliance newsletter.

The alliance was founded in 1994 as a bipartisan organization to promote local economic development. The corporation still boasts both Democrats and Republicans on its board and is registered as a tax-exempt, 501(c)(4), organization, which allows it to engage in political activity.

Nevertheless, Murray maintains the organization and its newsletter are not political. “My goal is not to promote freeholders. My goal is to let as many people who live in Union County know about what services are available to them,” Murray said. Union County provides the alliance with roughly 80 percent of its \$300,000 annual budget. Freeholders also grant Murray use of a county-owned 2002 Ford Explorer. Kean University provides offices for the alliance’s three staff members.

Murray said the newsletter supports itself via advertisements from businesses and organizations including Trinitas Hospital and Conoco Phillips. Roughly half of the ads in the current edition came from Union County government agencies or Urban Enterprise Zone funds from Elizabeth, Linden and Hillside, all Democratic strongholds.

The newsletter is a full-color, 24-page ode to county government, highlighting senior programs, summer concerts and ribbon cuttings. It is devoid of overt campaign pitches and thick with features about programs, services and columns penned by Democratic and Republican politicians.

Among Republicans’ chief complaint is Directions’ timing.

Murray contends the newsletter is scheduled to arrive during peak spring and fall marketing seasons, saying it is difficult to grab readers’ attention during the summer and holidays.

That it regularly arrives weeks or days before primary and general elections is coincidental, he said.

“This publication is not timed with any election cycle at all,” Murray said, adding

that the fall 2005 Directions debuted more than 30 days before the general election. State Sen. Tom Kean Jr. is an honorary co-chair of the alliance. He maintained the organization is not political, but said the newsletter's timing was troubling. "I certainly think the publication dates of Directions should be moved to remove even the appearance of political purpose," Kean said.

Local GOP leaders, meanwhile, criticize the publication for its prominent photographs of campaigning Democrats.

"The thing speaks for itself, especially when you look at it over time," said Philip Morin, Union County Republican chairman.

The fall 2005 Directions featured a front-page photograph of a freeholder up for re-election. The previous fall, the front page featured two campaigning freeholders and Sheriff Ralph Froehlich, who was also up for re-election.

Murray contends the trend is, again, coincidental.

Yes, the mayors and freeholders pictured on the recent cover are up for re-election, Murray said. But, he added, none of them faced stiff competition in last month's primary.

If Directions were a political tool, Murray said, it would focus on Democrats running in heated races.

Besides, Murray said, every state legislator representing Union County — whether Democrat and Republican — is invited to submit a column, which runs in Directions unedited.

Charlotte DeFilippo, Union County Democratic chair, said the GOP's complaints about Directions being political were merely jealous prattle. "If the Republicans were in charge, they would do no less and probably more. They are simply being crybabies," she said.

State Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (R-Union) was among the Republicans with a column in the recent Directions. Nevertheless, he, too, said he was concerned about publication's politics.

“If the purpose is to feature programs,” Bramnick said, “then why feature all the politicians?”