

Voters in Union to decide on study  
Will there be charter study for township?  
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BY JASON JETTSTAR-LEDGER STAFF

With an uncontested race for the only seat up for vote on the township committee, a charter-study question is front and center on the Nov. 4 municipal ballot in Union.

However the proposal has received little publicity from township committee members, who voted a year ago to put it up for vote, and supporters fear it may be overlooked at the polls during a highly charged presidential election.

"Shall a charter commission be elected to study the charter of the Township of Union and to consider a new charter or improvements in the present charter and to make recommendations thereon?"

Voters will face that question, drafted by the township committee a year ago to head off a change-of-government petition drive conducted by an ad hoc Citizens for a United Union. The CUU's push for a council-manager government, with ward representation, died last spring in litigation with the township over the validity of petition signatures.

The group contended it had more than enough signatures to force a special election on changing from the township committee government established when Union was incorporated 200 years ago.

However, Township Clerk Eileen Birch determined the petition was 868 short of the required 5,523 signatures after 1,100 names were rejected for not being on the municipal voting roster or illegibility. A Superior Court judge upheld those findings.

Ellen Enriken, a resident of the Putnam Manor neighborhood, is one of the few voices raising public awareness about the ballot question.

"With change and reform at the forefront this presidential election year, Union voters must decide whether their local government also is in need of such change and reform," Enriken recently stated. "Our township government has been a one-party government for many years. There have been allegations of nepotism and cronyism in town hall," she added. "There have been complaints that officials do not apply and enforce laws and ordinances fairly and consistently, and Union voters will decide there has been too much costly litigation against the township."

Nepotism is an issue being raised this autumn by critics, of the township administration, including candidates seeking to sit on a charter-study commission if the ballot question is approved by voters.

It has been raised repeatedly over the years, including the 2006 municipal election, by opponents of the all-Democratic township committee. Now it is being termed a reason to change the form of municipal government.

Democrats have held control of the township committee the past decade, with each member hand-picked by the Union Municipal Democratic Committee headed by Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (D-Union).

Republicans had a reign of their own in the past. F. Edward Biertuempfel held the title of mayor 34 consecutive years and served on the township committee for a total of 44, ending when he died at age 78 in 1972.

Phil Geron, a former Democratic loyalist in town, charged current party members have made municipal government a job mill. "They have developed a cash cow that benefits themselves and members of their families and friends," he said. "We need a two-party system to avoid the possibility of corruption and graft.

"Township government needs to be streamlined," he added. "How can they cut costs if they keep hiring their family members, friends, neighbors and past buddies?"

Robert Resko, a former Union Center business owner, charged favoritism in employment is intertwined between the municipality and Union County, with numerous township officials or their family members holding county government jobs. He added the board of education is used for job-placement.

"I was born in Hudson County, so I know about political machines," said the 58-year-old resident. "I have never seen so much nepotism. Everybody and his relatives have government jobs, and it's three or four to a family. That's ridiculous."

Township Attorney Daniel Antonelli countered that the charges of nepotism are "without merit and are baseless."

"When you look at the total number of employees at the township and board of education, 1.5 percent have a family member who is employed," he said. "To the extent that certain individuals were hired long before public officials were elected, to say there is nepotism is an unfair characterization. Township spokesman Geri Durso said municipal employees are proud of their work in serving the public daily, and charged they are being brought into the election race as a diversionary tactic.

"Once again a small group of people with personal agendas are grossly misstating facts in an effort to influence a vote that will have a major impact on the lives of every person in this township," she said.

Schools Superintendent Theodore Jakubowski said the district gives preference to graduates in hiring, but not to individuals or families.

"There is absolutely no nepotism from the board of education," he said. "There is a very simple hiring process. They go through interviews with a principal or supervisor before I even see them. But I will say this. Everything being equal, we do prefer graduates of Union High School." Jakubowski is one of 10 candidates for the commission that will be formed if voters approve the ballot question on a charter study.

"There have been no debates," he noted of the lead-up to the election. "It has been kind of quiet."

The other candidates are Suzette Cavadas, Roxane Ciampi, Michael Cohan, Charles Donnelly, Linda Lewis, Bertha Little-Mathews, Greg Muller, Floyd Patterson and Paul Verzosa. Township Committeeman Joseph Florio is unopposed for a fourth term on the governing body. Instead of a political debate, the | local League of Women Voters interviewed Florio on the charter-study question in a session that began repeating broadcasts Friday on cable television public access TV34.

No mention of the ballot questions or the commission candidates are on the municipal website, and there have been no discussions by officials at public meetings.

Township Attorney Antonelli said it is not a case of municipal officials hoping that voters will ignore the ballot question.

"Any expenditure of public funds in support of a ballot question would be improper," he said. "For individual petitioners seeking to be on the charter study, it's up to them to get out the vote and make residents aware."

Durso added, "Under the ordinance (that placed the question on the ballot) the township committee is to remain neutral regarding the charter-study question. We trust the residents will assess the pros and cons of changing forms of government, and vote accordingly."

### **Nepotism in Union Twp.**

#### **Public officials and their relatives on the Union Township, county or school district payroll**

-Mayor Clifton People Jr. \$17,047 City of Newark, \$62,000 Union County Utilities Authority, \$4,000- Wife, Karen, retired in 2007 from the board of education (final salary \$96,000)-Daughter, Karlynn, municipal tax office (\$40,000)

-Township Committeeman Peter Capodice \$14,160 Union County Vocational Schools, \$134,000- Wife, Judith, Kawameeh Middle School (\$32,000)-Son, Chris, Union High School (\$47,000)

-Township Committeeman Joseph Florio \$14,160 - Son, Joe, security guard at high school (\$50,000)-Son, Michael, employed by Union County (\$61,000)

-Township Committeewoman Brenda Restivo \$14,160-Husband, Gary, an executive at Joint Meeting of Essex and Union (\$83,000)-Daughter, Donna, works in school system (\$54,000)

-Township Committeeman Anthony Terrezza \$14,160 .Joint Meeting, \$7,000 -Son, Sal, is a municipal employee (\$55,000) -Daughter-in-law, Union Police \$34,000)

-Township Administrator Frank Bradley \$140,000-Son, Frank, works at fire department (\$45,000)- Son, Patrick, recently transferred from police department, to county prosecutor's office (\$61,000)

-Assistant Administrator Ronald Manzella \$126,894-Daughter, Carne Santangelo, Battle Hill School (\$55,000)

-Phyllis Monguso, supervisor of senior center \$73,767 -Son, Anthony, township official (\$48,000)

-Richard Malanda, code enforcement officer \$111,000 -Wife, Terri, is municipal tax collector (\$95,227)-Son, Jason, an assistant school principal (\$91,000)

-Township Clerk Eileen Birch \$91,931-Brother, Joseph Cryan, a county undersheriff (\$106,000), state assemblyman (\$50,000) and chairman of the State Democratic Committee

-Antoinette Kielwasser, assistant township clerk \$67,000 -Son, Jay, municipal animal control officer (\$28,000)

Source: Public records assessed by The Star-Ledger