

TOP STORY

Democratic congressional candidate attacks own party leaders

Michelle Brunetti Post

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Tim Alexander, of Galloway Township, left, and Carolyn Rush, of Sea Isle City, both Democratic candidates in the June 7 primary for Congress in New Jersey's 2nd District, spoke to party members at the Stafford Township Democratic Committee last month at Ocean Acres Community Center in Stafford Township.

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Democratic 2nd District congressional candidate Carolyn Rush is lashing out against her own party's Atlantic County chairman, accusing him of pressuring other county chairs to support her primary opponent.

Atlantic County Democratic Chair Michael Suleiman and other chairs say her accusations are wrong, insulting and show a lack of experience and knowledge.

Rush, 63, of Sea Isle City, also claimed in a press release Thursday that Suleiman failed to stay neutral and worked to deprive her of votes at that committee's March 20 convention.

That vote overwhelmingly went to her primary opponent, Galloway Township's Tim Alexander, 56, a civil rights attorney and retired police officer. Five of the six counties in the district are supporting Alexander, and Gloucester is supporting both.

The two are fighting for the right to challenge U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, in November. The primary is June 7.

"He's like an old-time party boss attempting to predetermine who the people of the district will vote for in the upcoming primary," Rush said of Suleiman.

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"Not to be too flip, but welcome to New Jersey," said John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

“Seriously, that’s the culture and tradition in this state. It’s fair to criticize it and to advocate reform, and some do,” Froonjian said. “But rules were changed at one point to strengthen the role of parties in New Jersey, and county chairs do have power and they exercise it.”

Alexander has been working on his candidacy for more than a year, and before the convention had the endorsements of 2020 2nd District Democratic congressional candidate Amy Kennedy, of Brigantine; of former Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo, D-Atlantic; and of Atlantic County Commissioner Caren Fitzpatrick.

Rush, an engineer, acknowledges being new to politics and to entering the primary race only a few months ago. She has never run for public office before.

Cape May County Democratic Chair Dan Kurkowski offered to run her for county commission if she dropped out of the CD2 race, but Rush said she didn’t know what county commissioners did and wasn’t interested.

It is also Alexander’s first time running for public office.

To run for Congress in New Jersey, state law only requires getting 200 signatures on a petition.

In Cumberland County, the Democratic steering committee voted March 2 not to endorse any single candidate in the congressional race.

But about a month later, County Chairwoman Nancy Sugenis gave the endorsement to Alexander.

Sugenis said Sunday she did, in fact, throw party support behind Alexander, but that she did so with the support of the steering committee after Alexander drew overwhelming support from other counties in the district.

“The committee said it (the endorsement vote) would be brought up again if one candidate had a lot of support,” Sugenis said. “All three candidates — Tim (Alexander), Carolyn (Rush) and Hector (Tavarez) — said if someone is way ahead,

they would drop out.”

That’s what retired police officer Tavarez, of Egg Harbor Township, did. At the Atlantic County Convention on March 20, he dropped out and endorsed Alexander after Alexander won the vote handily.

Suleiman said he had pledged to stay neutral until the Atlantic County convention and did so. He called Rush’s accusations “a desperate attempt to gain attention.”

“If Ms. Rush felt the convention was fixed, why did she attend numerous candidates’ forums we hosted asking delegates for their support? Why did she wait over a month to air these ‘concerns?’” Suleiman asked.

“We’ve had a fair and open convention process for 47 years, and her blatant lies are insulting to our members and convention volunteers,” Suleiman said.

The second congressional district includes all of Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Salem counties and parts of Gloucester and Ocean counties.

Other county chairs said they, too, were offended.

“The Democratic Party in the Second Congressional District is united behind Tim Alexander for Congress. Any allegations that county chairs were ‘coerced’ in supporting the congressional candidate of their choice is insulting and does nothing to unify our party against Jeff Van Drew,” said a statement Thursday signed by Sungenis, Kurkowski, and Ocean County Vice Chair Marta Harrison.

Rush acknowledged Friday she should not have used the word “coerced” in a press release about Suleiman’s actions last week, and said she was not trying to imply that any threats were involved.

In contested primaries complaints of unfairness happen frequently, Froonjian said.

“It’s the role of the party to pick who it thinks will be the best candidate,” Froonjian said, “and who has the best chance of winning.”

Often in primaries, candidates want the organization to stay neutral and let the primary proceed, Froonjian said.

Once the county committee has awarded the line by choosing to support a candidate, he said, it's difficult to maintain neutrality.

Rush said Suleiman used similar tactics to ensure Van Drew was CD-2's democratic candidate in 2018, "and we all know how well that went ... to repeat such devastating mistakes in a mid-term election this crucial is both imprudent and undemocratic," Rush said.

Van Drew, who is the incumbent congressman from the 2nd district, was elected in 2018 as a moderately conservative Democrat but changed parties in 2019 to Republican after refusing to vote to impeach President Donald Trump.

"I would argue as an analyst that the mistake was not in nominating him, but in not cutting him more slack in opposing Trump's impeachment," Froonjian said of Van Drew, then the most popular Democrat in South Jersey. "The party didn't need his vote in the House, and it turned out he read the mood of the District like a picture book. Had he not been pilloried and primaried, the Dems might have had a member in a conservative district for years to come."

Rush and Suleiman have clashed over Rush's choice of slogan, and Atlantic County Democrats complained to the New Jersey Secretary of State's office that Rush was using a slogan owned by the party.

Rush is running under "Atlantic County Democratic Organization," while the official slogan Alexander will run under is "Atlantic County Democratic Committee."

However, it turned out the party had filed paperwork to own "Atlantic County Democratic Organization" after Rush had chosen it, and the Secretary of State last week decided Rush could keep her slogan.