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## Candidates call for stricter absentee ballot oversight

By Brian Lockhart

Published 5:25 pm, Monday, February 19, 2018

BRIDGEPORT — A slate of anti-establishment candidates running in the March 6 primaries for the Democratic Town Committee want stricter oversight of absentee ballots, citing a now infamous — and seemingly never-ending — North End City Council race.

The four-person council primary in the North End is heading for its second do-over April 10 with tougher requirements for collecting and accepting absentee ballots imposed by Superior Court Judge Barbara Bellis.

The nine town committee contenders running in the Black Rock neighborhood want similar scrutiny applied to the town committee races that determine Bridgeport's ruling groups. The powerful Democratic Town Committee, run for years by Chairman Mario Testa, nominates candidates for mayor, City Council and the state legislature.

“Superior Court Judge Barbara Bellis’s recent findings of absentee ballot fraud (in the North End council primary) ... tells the entire world, indisputably and quite clearly, any chance of a legitimate election is compromised and sabotaged by ‘machine’ politics,” Donna Curran and her eight town committee running mates wrote to state election officials Feb. 2.

Curran in a subsequent interview said it makes no sense to have strict absentee ballot safeguards in place for the April 10 council primary but not impose those same guidelines on the town committee races.

In response to the Black Rock slate’s concerns, the Secretary of the State’s office last week held a telephone conference with Bridgeport’s election officials to discuss “potential election issues, the relevant statutes and regulations, and make sure that the election officials and attorneys in our office are on the same page regarding the March 6 primary.”

Gabe Rosenberg, Secretary of the State Denise Merrill’s spokesman, called it a “productive conversation.” But Rosenberg noted that Bellis’ absentee ballot requirements for the April 10 North End council primary were specific to that one race.

Bellis has twice ordered a re-vote in the Sept. 12 North End council primary. Incumbent Jeanette Herron and running mate Michael DeFilippo, who bartends at Testa’s restaurant, are vying with Bob Keeley and Anne Pappas Phillips for two council seats.

Bellis ordered the first redo — held Nov. 14 — after Herron and Keeley tied on Sept. 12 for second place, and a subsequent recount turned up one absentee ballot in Herron's favor. DeFilippo was the top vote-getter.

On Nov. 14, the votes were more decisively in DeFilippo and Herron's favor. But it subsequently came out in court that Testa had phoned the police chief and asked for a cop to help DeFilippo pick up absentee ballots. Bellis found that questionable.

The judge also was concerned when the monitor she appointed for Nov. 14 found that 12 absentee ballots out of a bundle of 15 brought to the City Hall mail room lacked post marks.

Bellis threw out the Nov. 14 results and ordered a second primary do-over. The city appealed her decision to the state Supreme Court, and, in late January, lost.

Bellis has set down strict guidelines for April 10 on how to hand deliver an absentee ballot to the Town Clerk, how to request a police officer to pick up an absentee ballot and how to collect absentee ballots from the City Hall mail room.

The court rulings on the North End council race could still impact citywide and statewide elections, depending on the Supreme Court. The justices issued a two-page ruling supporting Bellis and promised a more detailed explanation "in due course."

"Our office, necessarily, will wait until we receive the Supreme Court's decision and legal reasoning before we are able to apply it to less specific situations," Rosenberg said.