

Tea-partyer steeped in mystery

By JANE ROH
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The 3rd Congressional District contest took a strange turn last week when an obscure, third-party candidate entered the fray.

Peter DeStefano, the independent Tea Party candidate this fall, didn't announce himself as a candidate. Rather, his name surfaced for the first time as a viable candidate in an internal poll commissioned by Rep. John Adler and released to several blogs.

But no organized Tea Party group had ever heard of DeStefano, who described himself to the Politicker NJ blog as a former Reagan Republican turned independent. Several activists sought and failed to secure face-to-face meetings with him.

After multiple attempts to reach him last week, DeStefano called the Courier-Post on Thursday.

"I've been going to diners and Wawa telling people I'm running for Congress," he explained.

"I've been doing things on social media. You can find me on Facebook." DeStefano's Facebook page appeared to have been created earlier that morning. DeStefano agreed to meet with a Courier-Post photographer last Thursday and with both a reporter and photographer the following morning. He canceled both appointments at the last minute, citing scheduling conflicts.

William Haney, president of the Burlington County Tea Party, said he heard from DeStefano for the first time when the latter asked to attend a vetting session last Wednesday for Jon Runyan, the former Eagle and Adler's Republican opponent. The Burlington organization had supported Runyan's primary opponent, Justin Murphy, and planned closed-door question-and-answer screenings for both Runyan and Adler.

But Haney became alarmed at DeStefano's attacks on Runyan during the session, actions that violated the group's decorum rules and elicited protests from members. In addition, Democratic Mount Laurel council candidate William Brown managed to get in and joined the verbal challenges to Runyan.

"Several members questioned (DeStefano's) authenticity or his allegiance to the Tea Party," Haney said the following day. "I asked him to stick around, said 'I'd like to talk to you.' Immediately after the meeting he disappeared."

By Friday, Haney said the Burlington County Tea Party was ready to denounce DeStefano as a fraud candidate designed to split the conservative vote.

"I think the guy is a plant," he said.

DeStefano's voice mail box was full Friday afternoon, and several phone calls were not answered.

Adler campaign manager Geoff Mackler said in an e-mail last Friday: "We're running our campaign, and you should talk with Mr. DeStefano about his."

But Republicans and Tea Party organizers were troubled by some parallels they saw. On Wednesday, Adler's campaign accused Runyan of hiding from the public.

Political parties regularly ban press and outsiders when discussing internal matters.

Last Thursday, DeStefano said he made his introduction to the group out of anger over the private vetting of Runyan.

DeStefano said he had been politically active before his name appeared in stories on Adler's poll. The Politicker blog quoted DeStefano as saying he tried to participate in the July 7 debate between Adler and Runyan on "The Michael Smerconish Show."

But after checking communications logs, Smerconish producer John MacDonald said, "We never heard from Peter DeStefano and we never communicated with him."

During last Thursday's Courier-Post telephone interview, DeStefano, a Mount Laurel resident, said he owned and ran High Street Art & Framing in Mount Holly. His age was unavailable.

The township confirmed the shop was registered to DeStefano. Visits to the store Friday turned up a locked door and storefront bare of campaign or political signs.

DeStefano said he was unavailable due to issues arising from a car accident he'd been in a week ago. Dale Mount, who runs a barber shop across from High Street Art, confirmed DeStefano's accident. Mount has known DeStefano for years through Masonic meetings and their businesses' proximity to each other.

Steve Jeffries of the Ocean County Tea Party said he'd earlier given up tracking down DeStefano.

"I did try to do a little bit of research on him. There was really nothing to be found," added Jeffries, referring to speculation DeStefano is a bogus candidate. "The thought has crossed my mind. I can't prove it, but that rumor is out there."

"There is a lot of concern that this person is falsely presenting themselves as a Tea Party person," said Don Adams, president of the Independence Hall Tea Party Political Action Committee.

Adler's commissioned poll, conducted in June by Democratic pollster Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, showed the Cherry Hill Democrat with a double-digit lead over Runyan, with DeStefano pulling away 12 percent of the vote. Just 3 percent of respondents were undecided, a result polling experts say is impossible five months before an election.

Russ Conger of the Libertarian Party and Lawrence J. Donahue of the Your Country Again Party are also on the 3rd District ballot this fall. It was not clear if they had been included in Adler's poll.

Adler's campaign would not release the complete poll to the Courier-Post, nor did the campaign respond to numerous attempts for information over the course of the week about the poll and why it was released.

"This poll is not reportable in terms of the numbers," said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute. "Really the issue is why they released it."

"Internal polls are notoriously unreliable, because often times, pollsters are going to skew data in favor of the candidate paying the bill," said Brigid Harrison, a political science professor at Montclair State University.

Without access to the full survey, including questions asked and demographic data, most newspapers do not report on internal polls.

"There are various ways in which one can make a poll produce the results you want," said Christopher Arterton, Dean of George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management. Arterton oversees GWU's well-regarded and bipartisan political polling operation.

"One could oversample in (heavily Democratic) Cherry Hill and not make it clear to journalists that that's what you've done in order to produce the results," Arterton said.

The Adler campaign continued to tout the survey's results and include DeStefano in the mix of viable candidates well into last Friday.

Out-of-nowhere candidates in the general election are rare and often arouse suspicion. In South Carolina, questions were raised when an unknown and unemployed man named Alvin Greene won the Democratic Senate primary without campaigning.

Alice Furia, former acting chairwoman of the Burlington Democrats, said she'd never heard of DeStefano and wasn't sure he was a serious candidate.

"This is just unusual, for a candidate to not to want publicity, and to have the Democrats and Republicans running in the primary and not this Tea Party candidate."

Haney conceded DeStefano's beliefs and motives could be sincere.

"Anything is possible," Haney said. "But I checked with all the Tea Party organizations in the county. He is not a registered member at any of them. He has not participated in any Tea Party events that I can find."

"I placed inquiries all over the state, and every organization I've spoken to indicates the same thing -- they've never heard of him."

By no means was Haney sold on Runyan. But he was surprised DeStefano was aiming his fire at Runyan and not Adler.

"Anybody can say they're a Tea Party member or candidate and they don't have to provide any proof. That's the strength and the weakness of this organization."

"I'm kind of upset because I think this Tea Party is nothing but a front for the Republican Party," DeStefano said of Haney's Burlington group. "I'm a true conservative. I believe in upholding the Constitution. I'm the right candidate."

According to Haney and Chris Russell, Runyan's campaign adviser, the group at Wednesday's meeting vetting Runyan booed both DeStefano and Brown for violating the rules of decorum. Haney said he allowed Brown to attend because his son is a friend.

"I did not know that he (Brown) would be out to ambush him. That was my mistake," Haney said.

DeStefano collected 237 signatures for his candidate petition. Asked if he had campaign staff or volunteers, he said his son is helping him.

Republicans said it was troubling that longtime allies and donors to Adler had signed DeStefano's petition. They include Marshall Spevak, who has worked for the Camden County Democratic Committee, pollster Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, Adler's 2008 congressional campaign, and Adler's state Senate office. He works on the campaign of Chris Coons, a Democrat running for the U.S. Senate in Delaware.

Asked through a Facebook message last Thursday about his signature on the petition, Spevak wrote: "Yes, I signed that petition. I did so with regret because I was very disappointed in the Congressman's (Adler's) vote on health care."

Runyan campaign adviser Russell responded: "That's the most ridiculous, dishonest political spin I've ever heard. Mr. Spevak is a professional political operative. He's paid to run campaigns."

Christy Gleason, Spevak's boss on the Coons campaign, declined comment through a spokesman. Gleason also worked for the Camden County Democratic Committee last year.

Though county Democrats declined to comment, a spokesman for the state Democratic Party dismissed as absurd allegations that Adler's campaign is secretly promoting DeStefano.

"I can state unequivocally that neither I nor Chairman (John) Wisniewski know Peter DeStefano," said Robert Asaro-Angelo, executive director of the Democratic state committee.

"I had never even heard of him until you called me."

Repeated calls for comment from Tom Turcol, spokesman for the Camden County Democratic Committee, and Sen. Donald Norcross, co-chairman of the committee, were not returned. Calls to the Burlington County and Ocean County Democratic committees were also not returned. A spokeswoman for Sen. James Beach, the Camden committee's other chair, said he was out of town and unavailable for comment. Brown did not return a call for comment.

Republicans may smell something fishy. They have no proof DeStefano is a fraud.

It is arguably democratic to sign a petition helping anyone run for office. Rules governing major political parties helping a third-party candidate are murky. Members of the parties are free to write checks to third-party candidates and are also largely free to help third-party candidates collect signatures, said Joseph Donahue of the Election Law Enforcement Commission.

"If discrepancies are pointed out by a political opponent or a media report, we can investigate," Donahue said. "To a large extent we trust candidates to follow the law, but we do routinely investigate (suspicious) activities."

Nor, in the rough-and-tumble world of New Jersey politics, can candidates be blamed for working the system within the law's bounds.

"If they're trying to build up his vote, to me, in an ideal universe people would not do that," said John Weingart of the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics. "But in a combative, competitive democracy, it doesn't strike me as beyond the pale."

But Tea Partiers who support Runyan worry some voters could be misled by seeing DeStefano's name in the news and on ballots.

"In Pennsylvania you wouldn't be able to do that," said Adams, of DeStefano calling himself the Tea Party choice. "There is a special line in New Jersey elections in which you can describe yourself however you want. We are extremely suspicious."

"I think that some crazy things are happening," said GWU's Arterton, citing South Carolina's Greene as an example. "You can surmise either of two things here: One, the Tea Party candidate hears about this poll and says, 'Wow, I got that without even campaigning and I should become more active.' Or two, the Democratic candidate thought constructing a poll in a way that brings to the fore this candidate would lessen the support of the Republican candidate."

"Where was he during the primary?" Richard DeMichele, chairman of the Camden County Republican Committee, asked about DeStefano.

"It's kind of obvious who's running this candidacy and what it's designed to do, when you have former Adler staffers now supposedly supporting this Tea Party person."

"There is growing evidence clearly pointing to Peter DeStefano being nothing more than a Trojan horse candidate who well-known Adler associates and politically active South Jersey Democrats helped to get on the ballot," railed Russell.

Political observers might wonder if all this is dirty tricks or sour grapes. Runyan's primary challenge from Justin Murphy raised questions about the former Eagle's ability to write and dissect legislation.

Though he has won support from former presidential candidate Mitt Romney, the National Republican Congressional Committee hasn't flexed its muscle here.

DeMichele denied that the allegations about Adler were a sign Republicans knew they were outmatched on the field.

"Regardless of the fundraising advantage, there is a severe disadvantage when it comes to credibility, and this only worsens their situation," he said. "At the end of the day his funding doesn't scare anybody."

Russell said the 4-to-1 fundraising disadvantage didn't matter so long as Runyan had enough cash for campaign advertising. With \$472,000 as of June 30, the campaign is poised to be competitive, he insisted.

As of the end of the second quarter, Adler had \$1.9 million cash on hand. Since taking office in 2009, he's raised \$2.5 million. Reach Jane Roh at jroh@gannett.com or call (856) 486-2919
