

Montgomery Township Committee shifts to all-GOP

By PAMELA SROKA-HOLZMANN • STAFF
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MONTGOMERY — For the first time in a decade, the Township Committee now has an all-Republican panel following voters electing Ed Trzaska and Pat Graham to three-year seats.

Trzaska walked away with 3,564 votes while Graham received 3,514 votes in Tuesday's general election. The pair defeated longtime incumbent and former Mayor Louise Wilson who received 3,386 votes and Democratic newcomer Neena Singh, who received 3,237 votes.

Mayor Mark Caliguire described Trzaska and Graham as "intelligent, hard-working and fiscally conservative" and said, "I am looking forward to serving with them."

Trzaska said voters who turned out to the polls and voted Republican had wanted change and thought Republicans would be more able to hold the line on tax dollars. In 2008, the township's **debt load** had been about \$62 million, he said.

"I want to thank the voters for their support and **trust** in us to do the right thing and improve upon Montgomery," Trzaska said. "We'll focus on the pocketbook issues; hold onto our promises."

Wilson said, "It was a privilege to serve, truly. I have no regrets — just deep appreciation for the opportunity to lead for a time, and for the good work of a lot of residents who want what's best for Montgomery."

This is the first time since 1999 the township committee will be all Republican. In 2000, **Democrat** Jim Irish — the first Democrat since 1991 — had been sworn in. Democrats held the majority from 2002 to 2009, but never had an all-Democratic committee. Republicans currently on the committee include: Caliguire, Committeeman Thom Carter and Committeewoman Kacey Dyer. Democrat Brad Fay did not seek re-election.

CONNECTING WITH VOTERS: Trzaska and Graham credited their **win** to aggressive campaigning, connecting with voters on such key issues as the sale of the Skillman Village property and finding

ways to lower property taxes.

The Township Committee last month approved the sale of the 256-acre Skillman Village site to Somerset County for \$14.14 million. The county plans to transform it into parkland.

Trzaska and Graham knocked on about 1,500 doors throughout the township and talked with residents. At least 7,000 handwritten letters, Trzaska said, were **mailed** to homes by the pair announcing the sale of Skillman Village, asking voters for support and discussing past accomplishments by the Republican-majority committee.

Trzaska said a common theme in discussions with taxpayers was they did not want development on the Skillman Village site. Before the park plan, which Wilson supported, the township under a Democratic-majority envisioned a "village within a park" concept, with about 80 percent of the property reserved for parkland and 20 percent for shops, restaurants, a **post office** and public plaza. However, that proposal evaporated when the economy crashed in fall 2008.

About 43 percent, or \$27 million, of the estimated \$62 million debt was incurred as a result of Skillman Village, Caliguire said. The property's sale now is relieving the township of some of that debt, Trzaska said.

"A lot of people in town are professionals, are well off, but were pushed to the breaking point and couldn't take it anymore," Trzaska said. "This election was all about pocketbook issues — local spending and local debt."

Trzaska said his goals once taking office will be finding ways to keep municipal **taxes** stable for a second consecutive year while Graham said she wants to be part of transforming Skillman Village. The pair in January will be sworn in to their positions on the township committee during the annual reorganization meeting.

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