

## Politicians, political analysts say endorsements largely do not sway voter opinion, but could drive some to the polls

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By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer

Candidates in the 1st Legislative District are collecting endorsements like merit badges as their respective campaigns begin in earnest.

Republican state Senate candidate David DeWeese has received the support of two large unions: the New Jersey State Firefighters Mutual Benevolent Association and the New Jersey State Policemen's Benevolent Association.

Incumbent Democrat Jeff Van Drew has received the nod from the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

Endorsements are a traditional part of state and local politics in New Jersey. But whether they lead to more votes is a matter of debate.

"I think it's always nice to get endorsements," Cumberland County Democratic Party Chairman Doug Long said. "It makes you feel good and gives you an energy boost. But at the end of the day, the only endorsement that counts is that of voters."

Some influential individuals can sway the vote, at least on the local level, he said. Long cited as examples Ocean City resident and former U.S. Rep. William Hughes, and former Millville High School football coach Tony Surace, who is running as a Democratic candidate for the Cumberland County Board of Chosen Freeholders this fall.

"A person like that endorsing a candidate is monumental," Long said.

Long said many times an endorsement holds the promise of financial or in-kind contributions, such as

a platoon of campaign volunteers.

Cape May County Republican Party Chairman Mike Donohue said his strategy is to break the 1st District down by town and win over those who shape public opinion in each community.

"There are 30 towns in the district. You have to run 30 local elections," he said of the district that includes all of Cape May County and parts of Cumberland and Atlantic counties. "The opinion-makers are important. But voters want to know where the candidates stand on the issues."

New Jersey's unions and organizations have faith that their stamp of approval means something to voters. Some release candidate "report cards" instead of tacitly endorsing an individual.

The New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club routinely endorses the "greener" candidate, spokesman Jeff Tittel said. Candidates are asked to complete a questionnaire and submit to an interview, he said.

The group considers not only the voting record but the behind-the-scenes work that a lawmaker or candidate has done on behalf of the environment, he said. The group endorsed state Sen. Jim Whelan in the 2nd District in Atlantic County but has not made any pick so far in the 1st.

"You're not necessarily going to change someone's mind, but you might help someone who is on the fence," Tittel said.

Lawn signs - planted literally at the grass-roots level - are a street-by-street endorsement of a candidate

used to sway neighborhood opinion. Newspaper editorial boards routinely endorse candidates. Endorsements can legitimize a challenger's campaign or help raise money for an incumbent, said John Weingart, associated director for the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

"It's very rare that an endorsement leads voters to change how they will vote," he said. "It's possible an endorsement could convince people to vote who otherwise might not."

Celebrities occasionally figure into New Jersey politics. Native rocker Jon Bon Jovi hosted a 2008 fundraiser for then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, Weingart said.

"If you see someone's picture taken with Bill Bradley or Gov. Christie, it can't hurt them," Weingart said.

This November, state Senate candidates will top the ballot in New Jersey, giving them more prominence, he said.

Both Van Drew and DeWeese said they welcome endorsements.

"You can't underestimate the power of word of mouth," said DeWeese, a longtime municipal court judge from Wildwood. "If you have supporters who are silent, it doesn't help you very much. But if you have supporters who are very vocal in their support and talk to everyone about your candidacy, that goes a long way to winning an election."

DeWeese said he earned support from the police and firefighter unions because of the controversy over changes to the public-worker pension and benefits systems. Van Drew supported a bill that forces public employees to contribute more to their pensions and benefits.

"We knew this governor would take a hard stand on pension and benefit reform. Democrats resisted until the 11th hour. They never got into substantive issues until the last minute. That wasn't fair," DeWeese said.

As for how he would have voted in Van Drew's position, DeWeese said, "If I'm sitting in the state Legislature for 10 years, it would never have gotten to where it was. There would have been no 11th-hour, hastily-put-together pension-and-benefit package."

Van Drew said he was not expecting the firefighters' endorsements since the group did not support him in past elections. He defended his vote on the pension package.

"Those pension funds have been raided and

borrowed for years. It started with Whitman and McGreevey, and they just killed the pension system," he said. "It hasn't been pleasant. It was one of our harshest partisan votes I've had to make. But sometimes you have to make tough decisions."

Van Drew said he is not sure what influence endorsements carry since his opponents in past campaigns received more public endorsements than he did.

Likewise, as a state senator, Van Drew said he has been asked to endorse local candidates for public office.

"I very rarely do it. I don't think it works," he said. "I don't do it to be hurtful. I don't think it's my place to tell people how to vote in their local elections."

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