

Rutgers-Eagleton Poll director: Ron Sworen's two seats 'can be open for attack'

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By **Douglas B. Brill | The Express-Times**

Two of the candidates vying for **Hunterdon County freeholder** this year downplayed the effect incumbent **Ron Sworen's** dual-office holding has on his electability.

But a political expert at Rutgers University said Sworen simultaneously serving as a freeholder and mayor "is certainly an area that can be open for attack."

A 2008 New Jersey law prohibits holding two elected offices simultaneously, and the extra pension dollars that come with it. But the law grandfathered existing dual-office holders, including Sworen.

"I don't think anyone knows from a political science perspective what effect holding two offices has. It is a pretty rare condition nationally and, of course, becoming rare in New Jersey," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll.

"At the same time," he continued, "it is certainly an area that could be open for attack, given both the new rules and the specific dynamics of how the campaign might develop."

Sworen served as **Frenchtown** mayor for 16 years and as a freeholder for the last five of those. In November, he **lost a bid for a fifth term as mayor**. He didn't return messages last week seeking comment.



Courtesy of Ron Sworen

Hunterdon County Freeholder and former Frenchtown Mayor Ron Sworen is seeking re-election as freeholder.



Snubbed as running mate

Like Sworen, fellow Freeholder Matthew Holt has a term that ends after 2012. **Holt last week passed on Sworen as a running mate**, picking Raritan Township Committeeman John King instead.

Holt said his choice was unrelated to Sworen's two offices, although Holt had recommended Sworen resign as mayor.

"This isn't an anti-Sworen move," Holt said. "My prime factors for selecting Mr. King were what talents I thought would be advantageous to our board."

Redlawsk, the political expert, said he couldn't recall another time an office holder declined to run for re-election with a fellow incumbent from the same party.

The primary election is June 5 and serves almost as a general election in heavily conservative Hunterdon County. The county hasn't had a Democratic freeholder since 1982.

It's unknown how much dual-office holding cost Sworen in the mayoral election or might cost him in this year's Republican primary, if he chooses to seek a third term.

But his mayoral loss followed a race in which **his opponent called him a "double dipper,"** as well as months of Gov. Chris Christie making dual-office holders emblematic of a need for pension reform.

King opposes dual-office

King drafted an ethics policy for Raritan Township that, in part, prohibits dual-office holding. He said Sworen's two offices could have shaped some negative public opinion of Sworen, but King mostly credited Sworen's double service.

"Historically," King said, holding two offices "was never really considered to be a terrible thing.

"In light of today's politics and today's economy, however, I think that's probably something he should have reconsidered. ... But Ron served 16 years, and I think he deserves kudos."

As he reflected on his time as mayor in January, Sworen said he doesn't believe holding two offices cost him the election.



Hunterdon
County
Democrat Photo
John King

But he said the law was intended for pension abuses, not those who merely want to serve two communities.

State lawmakers earn \$49,000 annually, and a Star-Ledger analysis found one in three legislators earns another public paycheck on top of that.

Sworen said he earned less than half of that, a combined \$22,500 annually from the two offices, with a pension that stands to be a modest \$137 per month.

"I could accept that law. It made sense. I believe it's a good law, but it's not for people like me," Sworen said previously. "I think the intent was more for people who are in the Senate or Assembly and also the mayor of a major city -- the people making the big bucks."