

Cherry Hill Republicans Hoping for Christie Boost

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Cherry Hill Republicans are hoping for a boost from Gov. Chris Christie, who met with locals at Ponzio's last week. Photo by Bryan Littel.

Polls indicate there may be a coattail effect from the governor's popularity.

It's been decades since Republicans have had even a single seat on Cherry Hill's council, but this year, the challengers say it's different.

This year, they have an ace already out on the table.

Trailing that ace—Gov. Chris Christie—through Ponzio's during a campaign stop last week, two of those candidates pointed to some of the things the governor has done in his first term, especially his willingness to bridge the aisle to the Democrats to get things done, as examples of what could work locally.

"We've had no bipartisanship in Cherry Hill for 30 years," Nancy O'Dowd said, criticizing what she called the closed-door attitude of the all-Democrat township council.

It's actually about 20 years—Republican Bruce Wallace served a term on council in the early 1990s—but that was a single seat in a township that's had one-party rule for decades.

Having a massively popular governor leading the way—Christie's lead is 36 points, according to a just-released Rutgers-Eagleton poll—might just be the edge they need, fellow Republican candidate John Galie said.

"Obviously, it definitely helps," Galie said. "Any time you have the governor take time out of his schedule to visit your constituency, it helps."

More than just that, the governor helps project a positive image, O'Dowd said.

"I've actually had people here talking to me about how Gov. Christie opened their eyes to how Republicans can be bipartisan and aren't as bad as they always thought they were," she said. "We do hope that he'll help get our message out to the public."

The pollsters seem to agree, noting a potential coattail effect for Christie—95 percent of Republicans support the governor, according to that Rutgers-Eagleton poll, and only 59 percent of Democrats back their party's gubernatorial candidate, Barbara Buono.

"Over the past month, Christie's campaign appears to have convinced more Democrats to abandon Buono," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and professor of political science at Rutgers University. "Whether Democrats are switching to Christie or just planning to stay home, the small gains Buono had made with her party base over previous months have been reversed. The risk is great for Democrats up and down the ballot if uninspired party faithful fail to turn out."

While the Rutgers-Eagleton poll didn't dig down to the local level, generic polling on the Assembly and Senate races indicates a narrowing gap between Democrats and Republicans.

"As always, these statewide tests do not tell us about individual districts, and they are highly contingent on who actually chooses to vote in these races," noted Redlawsk. "But as the statewide margin closes, some Democratic seats may be more at risk than they were before."

The poll also indicated Democrats are less enthusiastic about the race, and O'Dowd said she thinks local Democrats may be less likely to turn out because of the special U.S. Senate election last month.

"The Democrats already got their senator elected, so they may not be as motivated to come out," O'Dowd said, referring to new U.S. Senator Cory Booker, "and I think there's a lot of dissatisfaction in Cherry Hill. People may be ready for some change."

O'Dowd and Galie didn't cite many specifics of that dissatisfaction, though they both hit on the controversial apartment complex at the old Haddonfield Lumber site, which was approved by the zoning board last year, and is now the subject of a lawsuit brought by residents near the property.

"You have community members having to sue their government," Galie said. "This is not one or two people, this is hundreds of them."

Still, the Republicans face a challenge in the council race in trying to unseat any of the Democrats.

They face nearly the identical Democratic slate that beat them the last time Christie was atop the ticket—though in the closest election in a decade. Registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans in the township by a more than 2-to-1 margin, and apart from the 2009 council race, the Democratic Party has won nearly every council and mayoral election over the last decade by thousands of votes.

But walking in the governor's wake, as people crowded the booths to get a chance to talk with the governor or get a photo, Galie said he and his fellow Republicans are hopeful for their chances—and the opportunity to at least put a dent in one-party rule locally.

"We need a balance of voice, a balance at the table," he said.