

POLITICS

North Ward candidates pledge to do better, be better for Trenton after 4 years of strife

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TRENTON » They're hoping to be the city's North star. In dueling campaign kickoff events, North Ward council candidates Jennifer Williams and Algernon Ward laid out visions for a more prosperous Trenton following four years of acrimony under current leaders.

For the first time since 2010, residents will have a new representative as current Councilwoman and former Vice President Marge Caldwell-Wilson announced this month that she wouldn't run for a fourth term.

That opened the race up for one of the five candidates vying for the seat.

While their platforms dovetailed on issues like public safety, job creation and economic redevelopment, the two candidates' competing styles were on display Wednesday.

In a prepared speech that lasted roughly 10 minutes, Williams riled up supporters from behind a podium at Trenton Social, saying Trenton must do a better job at marketing itself to investors and people looking to relocate from bigger cities like New York.

The current crop of legislators have at times pushed a Trenton-first mantra that has come across as adversarial to outsiders.

That must change if Trenton is going to change for the better, Williams said.

"We have to sell ourselves," she said. "We have to bring everyone to the table and find a middle way. I do believe a middle way exists." Rocking white jeans and



RICH HUNDLEY II FOR THE TRENTONIAN

North Ward candidate Jennifer Williams delivers a speech during her campaign kickoff event Wednesday at Trenton Social



RICH HUNDLEY II FOR THE TRENTONIAN

City activist Algernon Ward hopes the third time is the charm in his bid for the North Ward seat. Longtime incumbent Marge Caldwell-Wilson announced she's not running for a fourth term.

a colorful shirt, Ward delivered an on-off-the-cuff, 75-minute sermon in front

of a smattering of residents at the Conservatory Mansion that was more com-

munity forum than stump speech.

He touched on issues of

police brutality and the city's tepid response to COVID-19 and monkeypox, decrying antics of the city's health officer, Yvette Graffie-Cooper, who made headlines a few months ago after pictures and videos emerged of her receiving a half-naked rubdown at health department headquarters.

Both candidates pledged to do better than "ill-tempered" legislators whose feuds have become a source of embarrassment for Trentonians.

"Our reputation is terrible. I'm glad I didn't win last time, because I'd be in the middle of that mess. It was a blessing in disguise," said Ward, who is running for the third time to restore pride to the seat.

"This election is about saving our city," said Williams, who was born at St. Francis Hospital and recalled delivering newspapers in the city as a kid. "We've had presidents visit here. We've had presidents talk about what happened here. They don't say the Battle of Hamilton. They don't say the Battle of Hightstown."

But another image of Trenton persists — one of violence and governmental corruption.

Former Mayor Tony Mack's kickback scheme didn't help. And neither did record-setting violence the last couple years under Gucciardi, as Trenton eclipsed and tied homicide records.

"This one fellow next to me, when I said I was from Trenton, New Jersey, he tapped me on the arm and said, 'You live in Trenton?' I said, 'Yeah.' And he said, 'And you got out alive?'" Williams recalled of an in-

teraction she had with a peer while pursuing a master's degree at Tulane University. "That's in the early 90s."

The longtime head of Trenton's GOP, Williams is running to improve the city's reputation and burnish her own.

She made history in 2016 as the first openly transgender delegate to attend the Republican National Convention.

For the last 14 years, Williams has served on the city zoning board, the last two as chairwoman.

This is her first foray into nonpartisan politics after running in 2019 for an assembly seat in the heavily Democratic 15th Legislative District. Her campaign slogan is of restoring respect, honor and commitment to Trenton.

That won't come easy — Trenton was once voted the least gay-friendly city in New Jersey.

And current leaders haven't helped improve that reputation with their anti-LGBTQ antics the past few years.

West Ward Councilwoman Robin Vaughn faced calls for her resignation after she was caught on tape during a 2020 coronavirus briefing calling the openly gay mayor a "motherf**king drug addict pedophile."

She also told one of Gucciardi's allies, Councilman Joe Harrison, to continue felling the politician.

Then at a rally for Council President Kathy McBride, city activist and fellow North Ward council candidate Divine Allah derided the mayor as a "f**got."

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Despite those high-profile instances of hate speech, Williams has felt embraced and accepted by Trentonians. Going door

to door in neighborhoods, she'll see pockets of rainbow flags.

"I'm not gonna say everything has been easy-peasy and rainbows and sunshine, but, for the most part, people are welcoming," she said. "It's a much better place than it was in the

1980s and 1990s, when you had to worry about things like gay bashing."

For his part, Ward, a retired state research scientist, spent a large part of his address focused on the city's lackluster COVID-19 efforts that killed more than 1,200 people in Mercer County.

He cited a death toll in Trenton that was in the hundreds. The Trentonian hasn't independently confirmed that figure as officials stopped tracking deaths on the city website a long time ago.

Ward said part of his job working for the state health

department was to ensure New Jersey was prepared for possible wide-scale biological attacks from domestic or foreign enemies.

He worried the "next pandemic will be a man-made pandemic" that could have a higher death toll.

"If we're not ready for

the naturally occurring disease, lord have mercy on us when it comes down to a man-made weapon that's designed to kill people. That's what scares me," he said. "We're going to press every button we can to deal with the health of the people of the city of Trenton."