

All Politics Is Local

May Municipal Elections



SPECIAL EDITION

Municipal Election Special Edition

2022



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Introduction

The May 10th nonpartisan elections feature clashes in two of New Jersey's three largest municipalities, in addition to several more intriguing contests. In Newark, Mayor Ras Baraka seeks to maintain control of his city council against the larger backdrop of his own statewide ambition. In Paterson, Andre Sayegh wants to be the first mayor to win reelection to a second term since Jose Torres accomplished the feat back in 2006 in an almost ungovernable city.

Baraka, Sayegh, and other incumbents all undertake their reelection efforts with a record of having governed in unprecedented times, during the era of COVID-19, just months removed from Governor Phil Murphy barely surviving his own reelection.

Both in Newark and in Paterson, challengers have identified crime, specifically violent crime, as the most pressing problem.

In this special InsiderNJ report, we examine the players, the issues, the intangibles, and the political context in six of New Jersey's key nonpartisan elections, paying particular attention to Newark, where voters assess all nine city council seats, in addition to the mayoralty.





Newark and the Challenge of Team Baraka

The Newark Mayoral contest mostly defined itself by absence. That is to say, there were real questions about whether or not it actually existed. No one gave challenger Sheila Montague a chance, as incumbent Mayor Ras Baraka contemplated the next stage of his career with merely the inconvenience of an election between himself and a third term.

“There is no one left to fight, Maximus,” Marcus Aurelius tells the main character in *Gladiator*, and that’s the way Newark felt this season for Baraka.

The Mayor of Newark had led the city during COVID-19, and confronted the crisis of lead in the city’s drinking water lines. He presided at a time of unprecedented construction, and implemented an inclusionary zoning ordinance, which requires a percentage of all city development to go toward the creation of affordable housing. At a national inflection point following the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, Baraka – a lifelong anti-police brutality activist – passionately reasserted the need for police reform, and

advocated for the creation of a civilian complaint review board.

All of it combined – not to mention the fact that he had a unique gift for communication and a brother chief-of-staff Middy Baraka, unafraid of playing the role of muscleman-in-chief – made 2022 a walkover for Baraka, as his allies openly discussed the probability of a 2025 run for governor. In that context, the May 10th Mayor’s election became less a battle over citywide politics and more a consideration of statewide power. Therein, how Essex County reacted to Baraka became a somewhat curious parlor room kind of question.



Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo, Essex County Democratic Chairman LeRoy Jones, and Essex Sheriff Armando Fontoura had not yet issued an endorsement of Team Baraka as of the printing of this publication. That could change, of course, but it suggested Fontoura's irritation over Mayor Baraka's flirtation with an endorsement of a challenger to the sheriff last year. Middy Baraka made sure to set straight his brother's non-endorsement of John Arnold, but at the very least the Baraka Newark machine's differentiation from the county tempted the larger dimensions of Baraka's ambitions.



Baraka's citywide power required those curious about his political motivations to look beyond the mayor's race, to that other area of specific influence he wagered in this cycle. For as County Chairman Jones continued to consider the possibility of a 2025 candidacy of U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill amid intense arguments from within the party for him to embrace her as the Democrats' best 2025 opportunity to stave off Republican Jack Ciattarelli, Baraka, cruising to victory, faced another reality.

There was one ward where Baraka had to focus his attention.

If three of the ward races were only semi competitive, one carried more critical facets than the others in terms of Baraka's mayoral (and potential gubernatorial?) power.

Team Baraka had known to expect a war in the West Ward for a vacant seat created by the corruption crackup of Councilman Joe McCallum. The fact that they were in the fight for the East Ward seat (Councilman Augusto Amador was retiring) demonstrated their ambition and alertness to opportunity, they could argue. Their candidate, former cop Louis Weber, exceeded expectations with time ticking down, forcing a legitimate three-way race. That said, most insiders anticipated a coming head-to-head between Anthony Campos and Mike Silva, and neither had the potential to fully actualize a Baraka agenda.

No matter.

The East was a longtime Baraka-elusive ward, usually ultimately determined by its closeness to the North.

Team Baraka engaged two additional wards with more than passing interest: the Central and in the South. Though the Central was long a hot spot, and seldom uncompetitive, incumbent Councilwoman Lamonica McIver would likely win reelection, maybe 2-1 over her challenger Shawn McCrae. She had a reputation as a worker – and high visibility.

The South?



The South was Baraka's home ward. His hand-picked candidate, recreation director Pat Council, a credible successor to retiring Councilman John Sharpe James, faced the prospect of a runoff with former Youth Services Director Terence Bankston.

So what?

So what, Team Baraka could argue.

Council could handle a runoff with Bankston, they insisted. The math of the contest almost necessitated a showdown, and when they got there, they would beat Bankston, they said. Council had deep organizational ties.

The real story of the cycle, they could say, is they had short-circuited an at-large insurrection by former Mayor Sharpe James. Jammed up and jailed on 2009 corruption charges, James had envisioned a face-saving comeback this year, only to encounter an attorney general's ruling connected

to his corruption sentencing trial that prevented him from ever again holding office. James fought to stay on the ballot, arguing that he could, after all, run, even if he couldn't ultimately hold, an at-large seat. No one bought it, as the city clerk expunged his petition signatures.

Baraka's allies quietly racked the victory. They simply didn't need the citywide circus act of Sharpe James deflating oxygen out of the mayor's reelection stampeding parade. Removing and preventing James from cohering candidates running against Team Baraka in those key aforementioned contests proved crucial to the mechanics of incumbency.

In addition, Baraka's ferocious successful challenges of other candidates' shoddily harvested petitions (and residency status) ensured the reelection of Team Baraka ally, At-Large Councilman Larry Crump, and his running mate, fellow At-large contender, Louise Rountree, also of Team Baraka.

But still - it ultimately all got back to the West.

On a nine-person council, Baraka needed Pat Council in the South, Central Ward incumbent Councilwoman McIver, and, yes, rapper-activist Dupre Kelly in the West (where he faced a particularly competent rival in Chigozie Onyema) to all win their races. If any one of them lost, the mayor needed an off-setting Weber to win in the East.

Weber at best was Team Baraka's Hail Mary if any of the others slipped, and of the three others Kelly looked the most vulnerable against Onyema.

Onyema.

He was a legitimate threat.



Once a Baraka ally who went on the inside of the administration after the 2014 election, his relations with the mayor's team soured at one point and – in the aftermath of McCallum's meltdown – caused him to go in against the machine.

The stakes?

If Baraka emerged from the runoff with a numerical disadvantage on the council (4-5; as opposed to 5-4) his citywide opponents – nibbling at the ear of Chairman Jones – would make a stronger case for Sherill over the Newark Mayor as the party's best statewide 2025 option.

There were other implications.

Baraka had to keep an eye on North Ward Councilman Anibal Ramos, who could still emerge as a future mayoral candidate (or candidate for county executive). If Onyema made the runoff and then Baraka backed him instead of Kelly – and Onyema were to win – Baraka would sustain not only a loss to his former ally Onyema, but to that already powerful North Ward councilman whom he does not want to further empower.

Keep in mind, too, that the Baraka Administration is on high alert around Onyema himself, recognizing his potential to go citywide at some point if he wins his West Ward seat. He's singularly talented. For their part, and with the possibility of either Ramos or Onyema emerging in the future to take on Baraka or his successor, Team Baraka has Central Ward Councilwoman McIver at the ready as their successor to the sitting mayor.

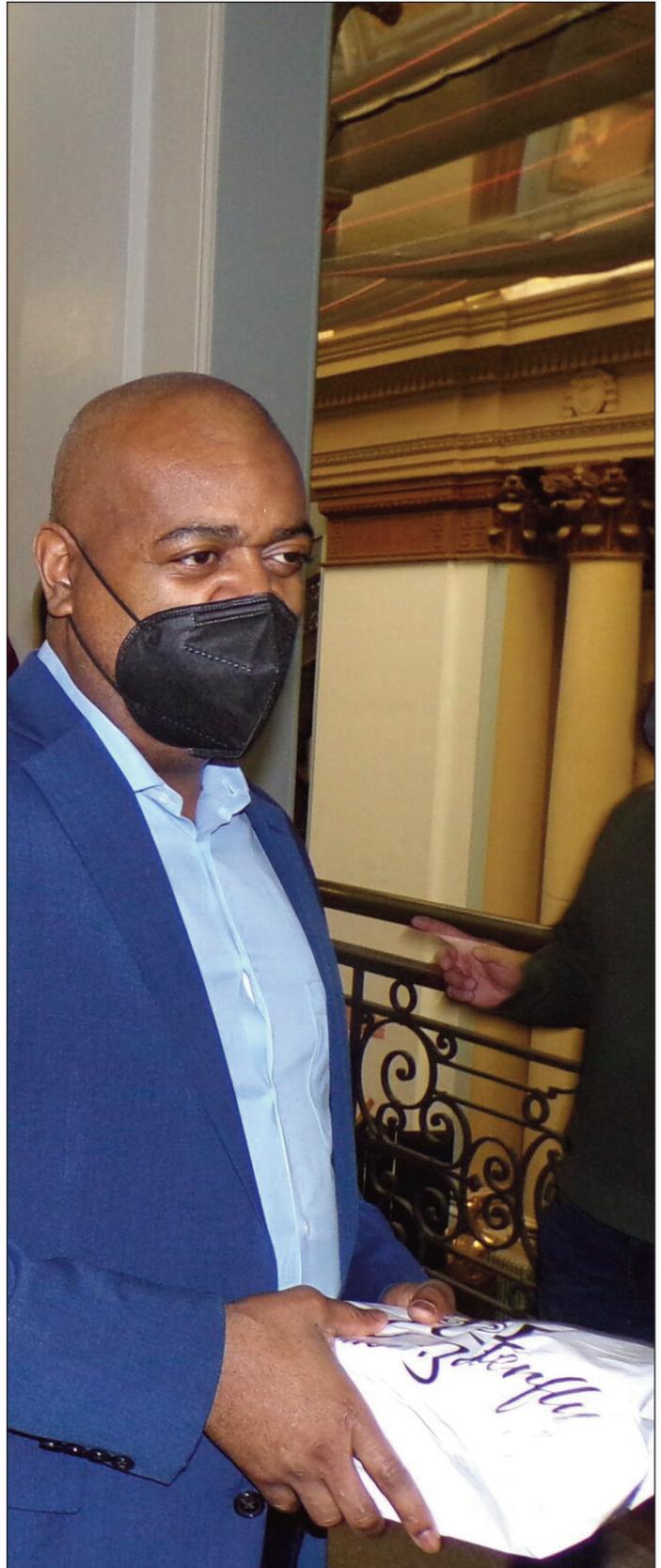
Even without gubernatorial prospects, Onyema (\$44K in the bank, as of the middle of April, against Kelly's \$44K) victorious would complicate – and weaken - Baraka's power.

The mayor's world order hinges on the West Ward. He has had a 5-4 council edge for his agenda (4-4 now, with the absence of the jammed-up Councilman McCallum). If Onyema wins, Baraka goes – conceivably to 4-5. Keep in mind, though, Baraka will still attempt to make a play in the East Ward if Ramos goes in with East Ward contender Silva, but affixing to former Police Chief Campos won't guarantee him an all-weather ally. Campos has a big enough profile to be his own person in the seat, regardless of where the mayor and Ramos stand.

If Kelly were to lose, it would be the first time Baraka would lack a majority on the council.

What would that mean as he attempts to navigate the traditionally tough weather of a third term?

As for any Baraka gubernatorial aspirations, sources describe the party establishment's force-out of Morris County Democratic Committee Chairman Chip Robinson as an opportunity for Chairman Jones to double up a 2025 county for Sherrill. If the congresswoman runs for governor, she will start the process with her home county of Morris as a key argument for Jones to chip in the almighty Essex, thereby presumably tripping up the mayor in *his* home county. Keep in mind, Jones would try to advance a Sherrill candidacy by bringing in another county (Bergen, Hudson or Middlesex) that would back her for governor provided Jones backed that county's candidate for senate president (and/or speaker).



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Baraka as a legitimate progressive would probably hamper the Essex County Democratic Committee Chairman's ability to close a deal with a Middlesex or Bergen for a Governor Sherrill. The party – conditioned wholly by transactionalism – wants to move away from the so-called progressive priorities of sitting Governor Murphy with a tack back to the center in a play to block Republican Ciattarelli.

That means Baraka – if he chooses to run for governor as the authentic darling of the left – would likely do so in defiance of the establishment, amplified by the argument that he can't get the party line in his own county, or as part of the deal that would create a new chrysalis of legislative leadership.



Would he run for governor anyway, at the very least to make a point about how far the party drifted from those true progressive values at the core of Baraka's local leadership?

Maybe.

Newark's May nonpartisan schedule is not the same as a Democratic Primary. But when Baraka first ran for mayor in 2014, he did so in defiance of the same establishment now clinging that much closer to life support, and more fractured than before, between north and south. Anyway, even if he doesn't run for governor, if he loses the West, he would face the future with another complication in sight city-wide. Notwithstanding the Emperor Aurelius' observation to Maximus, there is always someone else to fight, Julius Caesar insisted.

Sayegh v. Mendez II in Paterson





After his 2014 citywide loss, Andre Sayegh looked a little like the Wladimir Klitschko of Paterson politics. He had run for mayor twice and lost twice, and just as Vitali told his younger brother to hang up his gloves after an especially dreadful knockout loss, friends told Sayegh to abandon his ambition to serve as Silk City's mayor. The numbers just weren't there, they argued. The mostly Latino electorate (with Blacks running a distant second, and Palestinians third) wouldn't support a half Syrian/half Lebanese Catholic, or so said the conventional wisdom emerging from Sayegh's back-to-back failed citywide races. Sayegh, a uniquely energized and energetic human being with academic credentials to match his enthusiasm, would do better to shop his sunny brand of foot stomping and back slapping politics in the New Jersey suburbs, maybe down the shore.

But Sayegh wouldn't hear of it, promptly repackaging himself as that indomitable Patersonian as he rounded out his young family and prepared for the next political barricade. When it came, it arrived with the sound of the smashed political fortunes of Jose "Joey" Torres, a former two-term mayor whose 2014 comeback ended when he ran into wall of his own penchant for corruption.

Torres' political demise – and subsequent jailing – paved the way for Sayegh's own comeback, the prior glassworks of his Wladimir Klitschko jaw rewired during the 2018 election into a Manny Steward-like jab to poleax a divided Latino guard of Alex Mendez and Pedro Rodriguez. Backed financially in part by the associates of former Bergen County Democratic Organization Chairman Joe Ferriero, Rodriguez proved a strong candidate – not strong enough to win, mind you, but strong enough to drain Mendez, and split the city's Hispanic vote that Torres had ridden to victory four years earlier.

Remember, there's no runoff in Paterson. Top vote getter wins.

Now, four years later, trying to be Paterson's first mayor to win back-to-back elections since Torres in 2006, Sayegh does not have the advantage of Rodriguez in the contest to drain Mendez. But he does have Mendez to drain Mendez, or so hope the mayor's allies, as they trust that the troubled second-time mayoral challenger on his own will eliminate the potential for a galvanized Latino vote total in favor of his candidacy.

Certainly, the fact that Mendez crawls into the contest under indictment hardly gives him a mus-

cular look, even if Mendez himself – indefatigable, unerringly cheerful, and seemingly unencumbered by the world’s cares, let alone the cares of conscience as he awaits his next trial date – still radiates Sayegh-like alternative energy. He even propped up an apparently equally Sayegh-reproving Joey Torres at a raucous Brownstone event in support of his candidacy, in an apparent demonstration of double barrel outrage. In addition, those affiliates of Rodriguez’s old financial backer, Ferriero, now support Mendez, giving the 3rd Ward councilman an additional layer of energy as he heads toward his May 10th showdown with Sayegh.

What does it all mean finally?

Paterson never exhibited the organizational skills of Union City or North Bergen or even Jersey City and Newark. Throw in the volatility of COVID, urban crime, Sayegh’s natural numerical advantages on the ethnic politics front, and the presence in the contest of former Ward 2 Councilman Aslon Goow, widespread distrust of institutions and the lack of trusted news dissemination channels as Mendez and Torres run the equivalent of an “It’s all bullshit” campaign, and 2022 presents no preordained outcome. In cynical times, Sayegh goes before the voters as a substantive incumbent mayor with a record of getting his city through the pandemic and securing jobs and industry, mostly through the state’s cannabis frequency, with the additional argument of a challenger lassoed to the anvil of an unresolved voter fraud case and brandishing the endorsement of a jail-stained Joey Torres, as if it were a blessing from Abraham Lincoln.

Surely Patersonians will see the difference, Sayegh’s allies argue, and vote accordingly, opting for intellect over tribal affiliation and energy with accompanying attention to detail as opposed to sheer energy, and the value of law-abiding experience as opposed to the lessons that come with jail time.

Oversimplified?

Probably not.

But given the dynamics of Paterson’s quirky political history, Sayegh will likely have to do more than merely jab and grab his way to a May 10th Manny Steward win. Sayegh can do that. Having specialized in survival against the odds, in fact, especially since Torres and Mendez imploded in a back-to-back conflagration of bitterness.



The Virtual Version of Belleville?

Like all New Jersey towns, but more so, arguably, given its tortoise shell toughness on the ingress-egress mean streets of Newark, Belleville has a wholly parochial mythology. The Essex County town seems to have sprung from that swarm of sprawl pressing northward, forging out of the gas stations and fast food shacks a hardened migratory story defined by the proximity of the bigger city, along with the bravado about keeping the bigger city at bay.

Here's Belleville's politics:

"I'm Belleville."

"I'm more Belleville than you."

"My parents were from Newark, and I was born in Belleville."





“My parents were from Belleville, and I was born in Newark, and they brought me home to Belleville.”

“My parents were from Belleville and I am from Belleville.”

“Me, my parents, grandparents, are great-grandparents are all from Belleville, so “F” you.”

We’ve watched it for years and that interaction roughly approximates the core dialectic of the town.

So it’s something of a phenomenon that the sitting mayor, for all his conditioned box checking in terms of nailing down those main qualities of a Belleville public person (parents from Newark in his case, and deep personal roots in the town, born there, in fact), has defined himself arguably

as Belleville’s not wholly parochial personage.

We saw it when *The London Times* – *The London Freaking Times!* – covered Mayor Michael Melham’s self-identification as “patient zero” at the height of the COVID crisis.

We saw it when Melham took out a billboard against Governor Phil Murphy and went toe-to-feverish-toe with the progressive party establishment.

We saw it when Melham took on Murphy during the lead crisis.

And we saw it when Melham – out of the gory, grimy depths of machine-defined Essex County, biggest Democratic plurality in New Jersey – backed Republican Jack Ciattarelli for governor last year.

If the past mayors of Belleville had resided in a parochial political cocoon, Melham looked like the star of a television reality show, set in Belleville, yes – but more properly defined by a social media universe not only conditioned by Belleville.

He was – perhaps the word was unfortunate or incomplete, but it got the idea across – a *star*.

Now every good drama has a protagonist and an antagonist, and if Melham was the protagonist of his own reelection campaign, his totally opposite antagonist was Ward Councilman Steve Rovell, that completely local guy whose presence in the virtual world itself seems contrived. And if Rovell the protagonist of Belleville had an antagonist, then his name was Melham.

First elected four years ago in defiance of the party establishment, Melham thrived on the role of Promethean fire giver, at least in the social media sense, in a county rigidly defined by parochial machinery.

“I’m not a big fan of party politics controlling local elections,” the mayor told InsiderNJ.

Of course, he’s not.

“Brazil requires people to vote,” Melham said.

Brazil??

Where’s that?

“They make the point that that’s the way it should be, but I kind of prefer educated voters pulling that lever,” he said.





His campaign recognizes the reality of about 19% of Belleville's 38K population turning up in the May nonpartisan elections, while widening the net to target as many voters – presidential race participants included - as possible. If he routinely displays social media sophistication, Melham created his own targeting software to get people – his people and people who have a proclivity to be his people – to the polls in the May 10th election.

“We created a ridiculous vote by mail machine operation,” Melham said. “The secret sauce is that I wrote the software that identifies our vote by mail universe.”

Accomplishments to remind voters of the work he does?

Melham enlisted the aid of an internationally acclaimed muralist to beautify the town.

They created a dog park.

And, of course, he has overseen unprecedented new development in Belleville, which has created an opportunity for new residents to move to town, whose parents and grandparents didn't necessarily come from Newark or Belleville.

If his social media ubiquity galls long-timers and traditionalists, Rovell, in his challenge of Melham decries the mayor's overemphasis on development. “When they decided to change the master plan they took away the density restrictions and parking requirements,” said the councilman. “They doubled and tripled the size of the residential and hyper-residential development.

“I believe in smart growth and a mix of commercial growth and residential – moderate growth,” Rovell told InsiderNJ.

If Melham – alert to changing demographics in his town – seeks new residents, Rovell made a point – in arguing for the sitting mayor's removal by noting, “Nothing's been done for affordable housing relative to seniors.”

He's also bothered by the fact that the town attorney doubles as Melham's personal attorney, which doesn't give him a comfort level in light of the fact that the mayor is a realtor and developer.

“He tells Democrats he’s independent and he hangs with the Republicans,” Rovell griped. “He criticized Joe D and Phil Murphy and lost \$3.6 million in COVID aid. You need to be working with officials to make sure you get resources like that.”

Melham, Rovell insisted, is too focused on higher office, or at the very least, celebrity and the concoction of a virtual personality, and at worst – development. “I have no desire for higher office,” he said.

For his part, the mayor says Democrats have moved too far to the left (on issues like bail reform, parental consent, mask mandates, and sex education, he says) to pay attention to the real

needs of the people of Belleville. “I let Joe D and [Democratic State Party Chairman] LeRoy [Jones] know that I know they’re moderates. ‘I know you guys don’t believe [in Leftist priorities].’ He insinuated the pendulum coming back. I told him, ‘Let me know. I could be ok with moderate Democrats.’”

In the meantime, Melham’s doing great in the fundraising department – better than four years ago when he ran. Now, heading toward May 10th, he has \$116,000 in the bank, compared to just \$11,000 for Rovell – at least according to the last reports filed in the middle of April with the state Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC).





The Bayonne Battlers: Jimmy Davis versus Sharon Ashe-Nadrowski

Ah, Bayonne.

You torment me in my dreams.

I see you standing at the nexus of New Jersey, with a tire iron in one hand and a longshoreman's hook in the other.

At the outset, it looked like someone would literally not survive the political season in Bayonne.

Hudson – typically viewed as the county in New Jersey with the most political history – had fallen on dull times. Aside from Nick Sacco getting cut out of redistricting and Brian Stack turning into a tyrannosaurus rex, nothing much was happening over there.

So Bayonne gained in importance.

The coffee shop politicos and Communipaw gossips turned to the saga of Mayor Jimmy Davis to provide them with the security blanket of a contest in otherwise uninteresting times. Having demolished former Assemblyman Jason O'Donnell in the last election, Davis now faced a challenge from Councilwoman Sharon Ashe-Nadrowski.

There was some back drama here, as the mayor – fighting the image of a benign Bayonne guy mostly suited for holding oversized ribbon-cutting shears – suddenly decided to politically decapitate Assemblyman Nick Chiravalloti. It was such a shocking display of ruthlessness by the previously lovable Davis that it made enemies of numerous former inner circle Davisites now dedicated to getting behind Ashe-Nadrowski and, in the inimitable parlance of Bayonne-speak, “making Jimmy pay.”

The lead backroom purveyors of waterfront development now became the moral beacons of smart growth. The underground mythmakers of Jimmy as the classic embodiment of the Bayonne working man now condemned him as the most in need of hanging from a hook.

Wife of a cop and a local sports hero, Ashe-Nadrowski found herself met from the outset by an incumbent intent on cramming the atmosphere with a blinding blizzard of mud.

“Jimmy’s scared,” was the general assessment.

“Jimmy wouldn’t go negative like that unless he was scared.”

“Look at Jimmy – an incumbent – running a negative campaign.”

And so forth.

And it was true, of course, and yet, Davis fingered a smudged and greasy card that his predecessor, the man he defeated for the job, couldn’t play in his 2014 reelection bid.

Mayor Mark Smith had royally ticked off U.S. Senator Bob Menendez.

Davis flirted with irritating the boss when he gave former Menendez State Director Chiravalloti the heave-ho out of his assembly seat and supplanted him with a longshoremen labor guy.

But it was different than when Smith outright defied Menendez.

This was a case of City Hall egos getting into a pushing and shoving match that, if anything, Hudson insiders found more entertaining than galling.

Ultimately, Davis put to the test an age-old Hudson political edict: Mayors pick the assembly people. If Stack could pick who he wanted in Union City, Davis should have the same courtesy in Bayonne.

While Menendez stayed out of it (unlike in 2014 when he helped Davis cook Smith in the runoff) – and keeping the Hudson-wired U.S. Senator out of it could prove critical, given his power; would the mayor’s insistence on courtesy have repercussions in the local circuits of power that once helped light up the Jimmy Davis brand name, or had Davis truly mustered enough of a name to remain in power on his own, in the face of a well-connected and politically shrewd and revenge-motivated onslaught from Ashe-Nadrowski?



(Team) Irvington (Strong)



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Team Irvington Strong seeks to install incumbent Mayor Tony Vauss in power for a third term on May 10th against a challenge by Paul Inman. Inman was the East Ward Councilman until Vauss put him out of power two years ago, in the pandemic campaign.

Now Inman's back, and wants what Vauss has, in a citywide rivalry that goes back to the duo's school board days.

Given Vauss' advantages in organization, Inman and his team will have a difficult time getting traction.

Like his neighbor Baraka, Vauss has built himself into a position of strength in Irvington probably sufficient to enable him to soon augment his political career in higher office.

Ultimately Vauss will find himself in an intensified conversation about either state senate or Essex County Executive – a conversation that will no doubt include sitting Assemblywoman Britnee Timberlake (D-34).

