

# INSIDER NJ

*Special Edition*



# MAY 9TH MUNICIPAL ELECTION

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P.O. Box 66  
Verona, NJ 07044  
insidernj@gmail.com

**Michael Graham**  
*CEO*

**John F.X. Graham**  
*Publisher*

**Ryan Graham**  
*Associate Publisher*



**Max Pizarro**  
*Editor-in-Chief*  
Max@InsiderNJ.com



**Pete Oneglia**  
*General Manager*  
Pete@InsiderNJ.com

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# ALL ALONG THE HUDSON, PRINCES KEPT THE VIEW



In Hudson County, at a certain point it will become easier to erect iconic stone tablets in place of actual candidates. They're almost at that point now, not that it's too different from the rest of the country. The establishment dominates while the purveyors of anarchy end up on skid row – or behind bars, or just increasingly eccentric.

It wasn't always like this.

Honest.

For years, Hudson used elections to stay sharp. Even a guy on a unicycle with bad intentions presented the organizers in power with an opportunity to look alert.

As recently as 2007, a “war” (pardon the quotes, but that's probably the word Brian P. Stack would use

to describe his Democratic Party Primary annihilation of Silverio “Sal” Vega to win Bernie Kenny's senate seat) gave more than just campaign practice to budding operatives. It put Stack in power and announced to Hudson and the state that long-serving lion state Senator Nick Sacco (D-32) could no longer serve as the solitary purveyor of North Hudson power. I remember hearing Stack giving his victory speech at the front of a room (I would describe it as “packed,” but it wasn't really, it was more like a solid block of matter that could only later, in the pried-apart aftermath of the event, be identified as human beings) and thinking that he made a reference to his allies receiving “powder burns.” He didn't. It was just the way he said the word “Gutenberg” in the raucous surroundings and the overriding sensation of battle frenzy, that made it seem like a natural fit to his speech. “We fought so hard we received powder burns.”

At the time, it really did feel like a revolution.

If someone had thrown a tricorn hat on Stack up there, I don't think anyone in that room would have done a double take. The point is, the word "Guttenberg" sounded closer to "powder burns" than it did to the first printing press.

After getting flattened by Stack, Vega attempted to reassume his own pre-election human form, and almost got away with it, before getting re-trampled in the 2011 mayor's race – and the HCDO again re-humiliated - by upstart Army Colonel Felix Roque. Having spent too much time getting kicked around beneath multiple chariot wheels, Vega retired, leaving West New York to a decidedly redefined political horizon line.



When Roque won the mayoralty in 2011, his allies wandered the streets in a daze, having vanquished a Hudson County Democratic Organization (HCDO)-backed power structure in their hometown that had run West New York (between Anthony DeFino [1971-1995] and Albio Sires [1995-2006] and Sires ward Vega [2006-2011]) for their entire lives.

The new mayor understood the implications of his hard-won power.

Maybe it went to his head a little, or maybe he was just tired of watching grown men grovel in the presence of power.

"I left my fear in Cuba," Roque told InsiderNJ at the time.

Having toppled the Sires-Bob Menendez machine locally, Roque thought he could be Billy the Kid in there, and promptly set about undertaking anti-establishment antics, like having then-Governor Chris Christie preside at his swearing-in ceremony.

"Is Hudson the new Bergen?" a reporter asked Christie, who already all but had Stack in neighboring Union City wrapped around his finger. Keep in mind, this is going back to a time when Bergen was a swing county and a Republican (Kathe Donovan) sat on the county executive throne. Christie, just two years removed from his own reelection bid when – with Stack's help – he would come within 10,000 votes of beating his Democratic challenger in Hudson, loved the question.

Hudson as the new Bergen.

Hudson was supposed to be the county with the largest Democratic Party pluralities in the state.

Just getting asked that question probably made the always politically stampeding Christie feel like Napoleon on the verge of victory at the Battle of Borodino.

Roque was having a helluva lot of fun too, making Sires sweat bullets in his backyard and causing U.S. Senator Bob Menendez – supposedly con-



fronting issues of world peace from his perch on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee – to mercilessly have to get on the horn back to his own collapsing home base.

To his allies, Roque was like a modern-day Zorro, riding daring night missions against the corrupt hacienda owners, with Christie – like an overgrown child – sitting in the front row of the old movie theater with a bucket of buttered popcorn, watching and giggling over every saber thrust.

Fun while it lasted, it all came to an end when Roque announced his support for state Senator Joe Kyrillos (R-13) over Menendez in the 2012 U.S. Senate election. Kyrillos probably thought he was at the edge of being the next U.S. Senator from New Jersey. Then the U.S. Attorney announced computer hacking charges against Roque, and West New York’s version of Robin Hood showed up in a federal courthouse in irons.

Kyrillos, walking out of a Senate Budget hearing, heard about the charges.

“What a swamp,” said the veteran Republican state senator, apparently in reference to either Jersey – or Hudson – but what’s the difference – politics.

A swamp became a hurricane, as Sandy slammed the Jersey Shore in time for the general election, rendering Kyrillos’ seaside campaign operations snafued, and assisting the reanimated Menendez to bury his Republican challenger, 60-39%.

Somewhere along the way, a humbled Roque, incidentally, reversed his support for Kyrillos and issued a public endorsement of “the great Menendez.”

Roque would survive another election, and then

go out on his sword in 2019, losing to Gabe Rodriguez, a Sires acolyte, and – as it would turn out – a placeholder for the 2023 return of Sires, who, arguably, kept Menendez’s congressional seat warm for Bob Menendez, Jr.

Ok. Maybe that’s a little harsh.

Nonetheless, the 72-year-old Sires’ stab at local government after 13 years in Congress smacks of establishment power reasserting itself, with one of the HCDO’s chief warlords personally taking matters into his own hands rather than entrusting the kingdom again to one of his chief seconds.

But other implications abided...







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# THE ROOTS OF THE COLLISION



The political history of West New York in this election cycle inevitably involves the 2020-2021 redistricting process – specifically the legislative redistricting representative: **West New York Commissioner Cosmo Cirillo.**

Cirillo was essentially the HCDO's guy on the re-districting team, and absorbed the blame – along with under the radar minder Joey Muniz – when state Senator Nick Sacco (D-32) ate a map that turned him out of the legislative office he had held since 1994.

Sacco's loss proved Stack's gain, and the longtime pushing and shoving match between the older Sacco of North Bergen and up-and-comer Stack of Union City – mostly punctuated by mutual attempts to project peace – finally ended with Stack dominant.

Stack – who serves as mayor of Union City in addition to senator – also picked up the town of West New York, pilfered from Sacco's district, as Sacco – himself a longtime double dipper – gave up Trenton and settled for making North Bergen his sole elected office roosting place. An eight-time incumbent, Sacco looks again to handle Larry Wainstein, whom he already twice beat in their last two showdowns.

“It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve the residents of North Bergen as Mayor,” Sacco said in his formal reelection kickoff statement earlier this year. “During my time in office, I have worked tirelessly to improve our community in areas such as education, infrastructure, recreation and public safety, all while keeping property taxes stable to keep our community affordable. I am proud of the progress that we have made together, but even more excited about North Bergen's future.”

No announcement over here, however bland, lacks a symbolic silver lining.

Two new candidates will appear on Mayor Sacco's ticket this election, as Commissioner Frank Gargiulo announced his retirement from elected office, and Commissioner Julio Marengo is running for State Assembly. They are:

Board of Education Trustee Claudia Rodriguez, who if elected will be North Bergen's first Latina



Commissioner and who has worked alongside Mayor Sacco for many years in his Senate district office responding to constituent concerns and helping residents.

AND – in case there was any doubt about the HCDO's commitment to Sacco – even in his late



mellowing period and after the redistricting debacle with Muniz and Cirillo:

Hudson County Commissioner Chairman (And Hudson County Democratic Committee Chair) Anthony Vainieri.

That's right.

The chairman of the Hudson County Democratic Organization – and Sacco's political boss, at least on paper – doubles as his second banana running mate.



For his part, Wainstein is running a no-joke challenge to Sacco.

From the Hudson County View:

“North Bergen mayoral hopeful Larry Wainstein has invested \$551,336.89 in the non-partisan May 9th municipal elections, while incumbent Nick Sacco has raised \$215,701.92, according to their respective 29-day pre-election reports. Wainstein, challenging Sacco for the third time, reports loaning his “Good Government Team” \$479,000, with an additional \$72,336.89 being

spent on in-kind contributions that all came from him, an April 5th report filed with the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (NJ ELEC) says. He also lists a total of \$388,843.27 in expenditures, with political consultant Barry Brendel, who owns Cutting Edge Communications, received \$214,293. Brendel has also served as the chair of Our Revolution New Jersey.” So, it's money (Wainstein) against cozy political relationships (Sacco).

Sacco's also had to navigate the thorny terrain between Vainieri and Muniz, his longtime ward and minder on the outs with the organization under Vainieri's reign and just generally a longtime headache for the boss from North Bergen.

People like Nick.

They don't like Joey.

And they particularly don't like Joey since the redistricting meltdown.

As a new chairman, Vainieri had to make it clear that Muniz no longer could strut around the county in seven league boots.

From InsiderNJ earlier this year:

“Frank Hague's Hudson looks like a miniature version of itself, with toy trains subbing for the kind of awesome atmospheric on display in the Hoboken Station scene of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*.

“That said, they're working on it, under the leadership of Hudson County Democratic Organization (HCDO) Chairman Anthony Vainieri, elected chair in June.

“It didn't help Vainieri that his first big stumbling

block came in the form of a scandal involving his predecessor, but they're using that event too to polish up the chrome on the somewhat re-vamped, Vainieri-led organization.

“One somewhat significant development is the transition away from Joey Muniz on HCDO matters.

“Close to state Senator (and North Bergen Mayor) Nick Sacco, Muniz had a wide berth during the HCDO Chairmanship of Amy DeGise.

“He speaks for me,” then-Speaker Vinny Prieto told InsiderNJ years ago, pointing across the crowded floor at Casino in the Park to the solitary figure of Muniz, who emerged in a garrulous mood even as Prieto faded into the crowd.

“Those days are over, said three sources in (mild) Hudson rebuild mode.

“Vaineri and Muniz had a bit of a collision a few months ago, taking their grievances to the always reliably phlegmatic Sacco.

“Sacco protects Muniz, but in the time since Vainieri became chair he reasserts loyalty to the party, which Vainieri leads.

“To that end, Vainieri doesn't want Muniz speaking for the HCDO anymore.”

If there was any doubt about Sacco's commitment to Vainieri, he threw him on his reelection ticket. And if there was ever any doubt about the organization, soured on Muniz, and perhaps alert to Sacco shriveling, Vainieri joined Sacco's ticket as, yes, an underling.

And Muniz?

Muniz could continue to advise Cirillo, who suddenly looked like a huge underdog in his matchup with Sires, whose return to West New York this past Saturday received all the theatrics of Julius Caesar marching into Rome.

If Sacco in his own old guy raging against the forces that would stop the machine campaign had a brace of trusty and crusty HCDO war horses, Sires brought in Governor Phil Murphy and Democratic State Party Chairman LeRoy Jones to make his May 9th victory appear inevitable.

*“Cosmo Cirillo and his team need to come clean with the people of West New York and explain why they said they have obtained 12,000 petitions when only a fraction of that number were actually submitted to the Town Clerk.”*

Heading up the festivities?

The eternally Hudson County-hip Stack.

He had backed Republican Chris Christie back in the day.

So what?





Sires had actually been a Republican.

All that was forgotten and/or inevitable now as the self-professed very aggressively progressive Murphy and the chair of the Democratic Party professed copious love for Sires.

A Cuban immigrant turned Saint Peter's basketball star, Sires – even in his seventies - radiated a certain vibrancy that is often the province of old jocks, not the pretenders who supposedly played sports in another lifetime, but former full-court heroes who actually maintain the lifelong discipline of an athlete.

Asked to analyze the contest, a veteran insider offered the following:

“Albio’s likeable. He’s just really likeable. I’ve seen Albio with regular people, and they like him. I like him. Everyone likes Albio.”

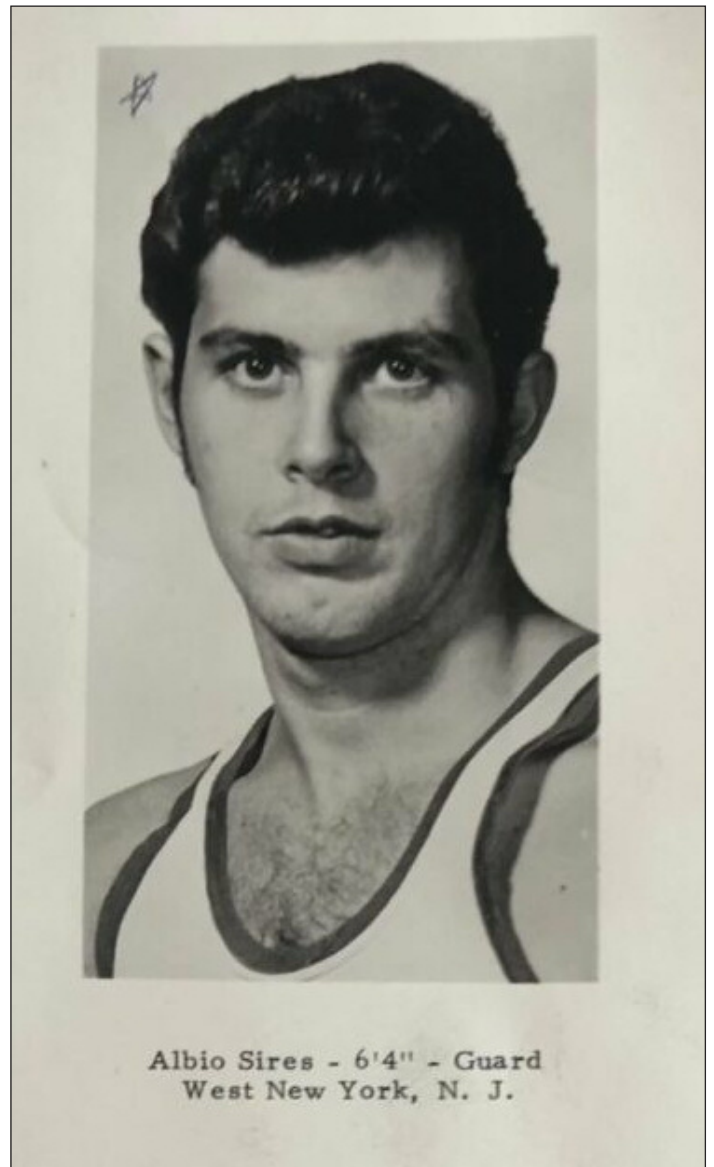
Any issues in the race over there in West New York?

“Um. Well, uh... er...”

The analysis sounded eerily similar to something

Sacco told InsiderNJ years ago just before he stretched Wainstein on the canvas for the first time. Asked about the issues in the race, Sacco said, “Issues? They’re going to have to invent them.” As he spoke, Sacco looked like a rancher hoisting bales of hay aboard the back of a truck. Actually, they were boxes supposedly stuffed with petition signatures. Stacked one on top of the other they could have doubled as a good-sized office building on the other side of the river.

Back in West New York in the present day, Stack was stacking bodies on top of one another on behalf of his old pal Sires.



As the veteran source noted, Stack and Sires both shared a history of breaking into the HCDO. Sires had run against DeFino. Stack had bucked the power, too, before they finally, grudgingly, welcomed him in. The combination of HCDO affection, gubernatorial prioritization (“I’m going to give money to Albio to build a new school,” thundered Murphy), Stack organization, and a lifetime of sports-rooted goodwill looked like too much combined power for Cirillo to escape a May 9th suffocation. Oh, and he had that discarded Sacco albatross around his neck too: Joey Muniz. Cirillo, though, could take some solace in a stronger than average work rate, and West New York’s recent history of toppling the power, going back to when Roque beat Vega. But that was Vega not Sires, and Stack wasn’t working on his behalf either. If anything, Stack probably took some delight in watching Roque spray the organization with a lapel carnation.

As if trying to make Sacco giggle, the Sires campaign offered a slow-moving punch that hardly looked like the kind of message that could produce blunt trauma:

“The Sires Team for WNY is demanding answers and transparency from the WNY Forward cam-

paign after they claimed yesterday to have over 12,000 signed nominating petitions. In reality, Cirillo and his team only filed 2,500 total petitions with the Town Clerk’s office, and the remainder of the petitions he claims to have gathered are a total mystery.

“Sires Team spokesman Phil Swibinski is releasing the following statement:

“Cosmo Cirillo and his team need to come clean with the people of West New York and explain why they said they have obtained 12,000 petitions when only a fraction of that number were actually submitted to the Town Clerk. If the rest of these petitions they say they have gathered actually exist, they should prove it by allowing the media or an independent authority to inspect them. The WNY Forward team is playing games with the people of West New York.”

“The Sires Team for WNY has filed 15,000 total petitions, with all of them being submitted to the Town Clerk through the normal process. Those petitions are now public record, and the Sires Team is proud to have its many supporters throughout the community be publicly known.







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# CIRILLO RUNS A SUBSTANTIVE CAMPAIGN (WHAT?)

For his part, Cirillo tried to make it about – what else – issues.

That was all he had left.

And remember, he was a Sacco acolyte.

From his own campaign release:

Cirillo, Ph.D., kicked off his mayoral campaign at the West New York Forward headquarters' grand opening ribbon-cutting ceremony. Commissioner Cirillo was joined by his running mates, Commissioner Margarita Guzman, Assemblywoman Angelica M. Jimenez, and longtime residents Walter Lopez and Hiram Gonzalez, who together have a vision for a better West New York.

Proud supporters and community leaders turned up in droves for the grand opening of Team Cir-



illo's new campaign office to demonstrate their support in preparation of the May 9, 2023, municipal elections in West New York. The ribbon-cutting ceremony was energized with excitement and cheers from the public who chanted Pa'lante, Pa'lante, Pa'lante (moving forward in English) to affirm their support for a new movement that will bring new innovative ideas to the small but vibrant community.

"I am thrilled to have had such strong and enthusiastic support from the community. Their support will pave the way for a better West New York that will bring opportunities that will make a difference in the lives of others," said Cirillo. "Our hope is to build a strong grassroots campaign that will focus on building a coalition of support that is representative of our rich diversity and creating a framework that will empower future generations to come."

Pillars of West New York Forward include:

- Bringing Back a State-of-the-Art Recreation Center
- The Development of a Comprehensive Parking Plan that Includes the Implementation of Angled Parking Throughout the Township
- The Revitalization of Environmental Services in Order to Focus on Cleaner Streets and Quality of Life Initiatives
- The Establishment of a Business Improvement District to Revitalize Businesses Along Bergenline Avenue
- The Increase of Accessibility to the Mayor by Establishing Walk-In and Mobile Office Hours
- The Creation of a Division of Constituent Services to Steer Residents to Programs and Services they Need

## CIRILLO SAT DOWN LAST MONTH WITH INSIDERNJ COLUMNIST FRED SNOWFLACK.

The underdog questioned the political thinking of the overdog, who went from Congress back to wanting to be mayor.

Usually it's the other way around, Cirillo suggested, in a mild slap.

As the Democratic Party struggles to escape the terminal geriatric tag, Cirillo – 36, or practically a child in New Jersey [or national] political years – told Snowflack that the voters want – big word coming up – "Change."

"At some point, there comes a time when new leadership has to take over," he said.



### FROM SNOWFLACK'S COLUMN:

*Cirillo noted that even while in Washington, Sires kept his hand in West New York politics, saying he "picked" the last three mayors.*

*The two before Rodriguez were Felix Roque and Sal Vega. Roque lost a reelection bid four years ago after he had a falling out with Sires.*

*Cirillo mentioned that Sires wants to bring back Richard Turner as administrator. Turner is a long-time mayor of neighboring Weehawken.*

*His obvious point is that a new direction is needed. Hence, the name of his team's campaign – West New York Forward 2023.*

*Voters will elect five commissioners and the commissioners will then select the mayor. The reality is that both teams have said they will pick Cirillo or Sires as mayor, depending on who wins – or has a majority. It does not happen often, but it is possible for candidates on both tickets to win. Voters select individuals, not slates.*

*Cirillo has been involved in public life since he served on the local school board when he was only 20 years old. His full-time job is administrator of Guttenberg, a small town wedged between West New York and North Bergen.*

*“I want to clarify something because it's state money and I happen to be the governor. The \$65 million set aside is set for one single purpose: to build a school [in West New York]. It's my money, and that's how it's going to be spent.”*

*Regarding the election, he said:*

*“My strategy is the same thing I've been doing for 20 years,” he said. That would be meeting the people.*

*Cirillo is proud of his work in town recreation, noting that, “I go to games, I go to practices, I travel with the teams.”*

*He said two things he is determined to do if elected is to have “walk-in office hours” in town hall and community meetings in different neighborhoods.*

*This, so far, has not been a nasty campaign and Cirillo did not make any ad hominem attacks against Sires.*

*Although he did say of his opponent, “I don't believe he's going to put in the same level of work and dedication” as I will.*

*There seems to be one major policy issue in this race and it has to do with a vacant piece of land, which is a rarity in these parts, on Broadway and 64th street.*

*Cirillo and his team want to build a community center and a three-level parking deck on the site. Parking, as all visitors to North Hudson know, is a perennial concern.*

*Team Sires disagrees. They say West New York needs a new school and that location is an ideal place for one.*

*Murphy in his hammer throw on Sires' behalf this past Saturday made a point of bringing up the school, and hitting all the right Cirillo-spasm inducing highlights, trying to turn the age argument around on the apparently substance-oriented whippersnapper.*



“He’s done an incredible job,” Murphy said of sitting Mayor Gabe Rosado, who stood at attention onstage behind New Jersey’s sitting governor like an In the Line of Fire extra. “Albio will take it new heights. He’s as good as it gets. He’ll take this community to new heights.”

Against the backdrop of Joe Biden’s cut and paste reelection announcement – “I-am-running-for-re-election” – as if culled from two dozen past Biden speeches to assemble sentences in lieu of an actual flesh and blood, podium proficient-incumbent - the good soldier governor lunged for the closer in his pitch to the crowd for Sires:

“Experience matters.”

Big “yups” ensued.

Yup. Yup. Experience. That matters. Likeability and experience matter.

And of course, unlike the bubble-wrapped Biden, Sires was standing right there.

Accessible.

Likeable.

A rock concert atmosphere pervaded with Stack and Sires nearby.

Murphy felt buoyed.

“This is no time – the way it is, the way the economy is – this is no time to give this community to untested leadership,” said the governor. “You need the steely leadership that Albio Sires gives. I want to clarify something because it’s state money and I happen to be the governor. The \$65 million set aside is set for one single purpose: to build a school [in West New York]. It’s my money, and

that’s how it’s going to be spent.”

So apparently there is an issue, at least one.

But more to the point of this contest, and under the Hudson hood of insider politics, Cirillo was that guy with Muniz who bungled redistricting; and now Stack, who actually plays organizational politics the way the rest of America slumps in front of a TV screen to watch other people play sports; and ensures packed voting rolls that represent the exact inverse of a yawning American indifference to politics, wants the future of West New York under his thumb.

He wants to expand the empire so that when Sires retires, he can put his own person on the throne in there.

In the meantime, he likes Albio.

Albio’s likeable.

He served in Congress.

But he always had a local vibe, too.





# CROSSING THE RUBICON WITH SIRES

His final days in the United States House of Representatives came nearly two years after that fateful day when he exited the floor accompanied by armed guards.

“I accomplished as much as I could in a horrible atmosphere,” said Sires.

Again, as much as the Republicans rankle him, so do the Democrats.

“The last straw for me came when my own members – 40 of them – voted against the Cuba resolution,” he said. “Some have a selective sense of human rights. It is very hard to build trust. Very hard in this environment, for me, who has fought for human rights all my life.”

“I think I’ve hit a wall, quite frankly,” he added.

He wants more American condemnation of governmental abuses in Guatemala, Nicaragua (yes!), El Salvador, Ecuador, Brazil; and more reward for countries like the Dominican Republic, which do a good job promoting human rights, in his judgment.

Of his own run for mayor again, he said, “I gave it a lot of thought before I decided. I left a lot of



things undone, and one of the things I committed to is a new library. The one we have now is not ADA compliant; it is a hundred years old. If I win, this is one of the things I want to accomplish. We can hook up to the Library of Congress. I would also like to build an overpass on the waterfront. As it is, people have to cross the street in that area, and it's dangerous. We need an overpass there. One more thing. We have a pier on the waterfront. Every other town has built parks on piers. I want to build a nice park for the people on the waterfront, one they can just enjoy.

"I'm going to run on my record," Sires added. "When I was mayor, I was the only mayor who built multiple site affordable housing through tax credits and a senior center. We still need more affordable housing, and we don't have affordable housing for veterans. I would like to change that.



"These are very challenging times, but you get things accomplished at the local level," said the congressman. "It took me 16 years to finally get an infrastructure bill. It would have never taken that kind of time at the local level, where you guide your own destiny. I love West New York. West New York has been very good to me, going back to when I came to this country."



Love and likeability.

Tough to overcome?

Maybe.

Likely, in fact.

But at least one person amid Saturday's local hoopla surrounding Sires didn't like what he saw, not in terms of what it represents for Sires – whom he likes – but what it represents for Hudson.

"Why is Jones in here?" the source growled. "He's obviously a stalking horse for Sherill. Why does Fulop allow that to go on?"

What was he talking about?

He was talking about the presence at the event of Democratic State Party Chairman LeRoy Jones, who issued tear jerky remarks about his long-standing friendship with Sires.

Not questioning Jones' sincerity on the subject of Sires' likeability, because Sires, after all, is imminently likeable, the Hudson source nevertheless

didn't like what he saw in terms of increasing goodwill among Jones and the crumb bums of Hudson who run the party. The source suspects that Jones wants U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-11) for governor [or senator] and will capitalize on events like the rally for Sires to ultimately cash in politically for his preferred statewide candidate, stepping over Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop, already a declared gubernatorial candidate for 2025 in search of early traction.

"Jones shouldn't be here," the source snapped. But he's chair of the state party.

"Doesn't matter. He's a stalking horse for Sherrill."

If someone was more interested in the developing gubernatorial contest, it wasn't Sires.

And it wasn't Stack, who appeared more than comfortable stretching his legs within the surroundings of the newest addition to his 33rd District.

"He looks out for me, and I look out for him and we all look out for people," bellowed Jones amid a shower of air horns, collapsing into an embrace with Stack.

"The energy we have in this room is great but we need to carry it every single day through May 9th," said Stack. "I commit to you, I will be in West New York every single night through election day. I'm going to live in West New York. It's not about building a political machine. It's about doing what's right for the West New York residents and the children of this community. As Albio did before as the Mayor of West New York. Who else would leave Congress and come back to serve his town as he did before?"

The comment brought down the house.

The Sacco election over in North Bergen, meanwhile, felt like an afterthought, sustained by relationships, sure, as Union City and West New York looked animated with theater of a kind that bespoke of new dimensions of power, of an old lion returning, yes – paw in calloused paw with the still rising, and still apparently politically hungry, younger North Hudson cat.

