

GOVERNOR 2025

SPECIAL EDITION



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NJ  **PBS**



INTRODUCTION

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For all the histrionics around Tammy Murphy's 2024 run for U.S. Senate, finally and fundamentally the First Lady's candidacy reveals an overriding (and concerning) reality, namely the establishment's general lack of interest in that federal job. It's an old truism in New Jersey politics, which the late U.S. Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) routinely mentioned, perhaps somewhat ruefully, at public events: the bosses care about the courthouse, not the U.S. House – and certainly not the U.S. Senate.

If the county party leaders received in ho hum fashion the astonishing news

of sitting U.S. Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) allegedly working as an agent of Egypt in exchange for gold bars, they similarly coughed up the candidacy of the first lady with a collective shrug.

Who cares?

Oh, her husband, Governor Phil Murphy, will look more favorably on my country come budget time if we back his wife to replace Menendez, then I care. Then I can even issue a ringing endorsement.

And I don't care if the public doesn't care.

That's the attitude, perhaps markedly notable for its complacency as the country descends into darkness. But it also contrasts dramatically with the interest those same coffee urn organizers have for the developing 2025 New Jersey governor's contest, scheduled to happen a year after the U.S. Senate and presidential races.

That contest continues to accelerate, with nearly every political move in the state connected to the coming succession of Governor Phil Murphy.

Let's take a look at where things stand right now, or, more to the point, who stands where, as New Jersey gears up early for a statewide governor's race.



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THE CANDIDATE

Jack Ciattarelli **R**



The 2021 Republican nominee for Governor came close to knocking off incumbent Democrat Phil Murphy, 48-51%, and on the strength of his near win, wants another shot. Following his loss, Ciattarelli never really stopped running for governor. This much is true: Only a very special competitor will be able to outwork and out hustle the all-but-declared former Assemblyman from Somerset County.

While Murphy ran a *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* campaign,

beaming down from on high, Ciattarelli hit the boardwalks, bodegas, and bars, really talking to people, listening to their troubles, and trying to shape those conversations into actual policy.

He ticked off his own plans for his home state: lowering property taxes, creating more jobs by making this a better place to do business, getting his arms around the monster of state government corrupted by special interests, and making it smaller and more responsive to state

needs. He would back cops, unlike Murphy, he said, who he derided as “the most anti-cop governor we’ve ever had. Crime is up all across the state.”

He also promised “we’re going to get back to basics in our public schools system.”

“Every dime they made went to their four kids’ nothing my parents wouldn’t do for their family, neighbor, state and country and they expected nothing in return. When

they saw a successful person they were never resentful. They said that is someone you should be like. My parents celebrated hard work and other people's success. Under Governor Ciattarelli, we will celebrate hard work and everybody's success right here in New Jersey."

It was his speech, spoken, half shouted, and bellowed proudly and indefatigably at the Election Eve climax of a campaign for governor he seemed to have started as a 2017 Republican Primary casualty. Heavy on the bar chords of a rock song pieced together out of factory town skid marks, scraps and scrapes

of hard luck made good, character undeterred, work weathered, sacrifices shouldered and never at so grave a cost as what another kid from the same river town named John Basilone bought on a battlefield in WWII, it connected.

Almost enough to make him governor.

Ciattarelli at the very least remains a very tough out, even in a state which numbers a million more registered Democrats than Republicans. Based on his messaging, work rate, and bumbled opportunities by Democrats, a lot of insiders con-

tinue to see Ciattarelli as the 2025 favorite. Of course, a 2024 victory by a come-backing Trump could mangle the New Jersey Republican. Also, the "leaders" in his own scared, transactional, and special interest-subservient party, intent on making sure that a guy who keeps his own counsel and actually wants to do the job in the interest of real people, may activate in time to make sure that he will not get ahead.

To start with, he will have a tremendous challenge coping with Jon Bramnick's entry into the contest (see below).

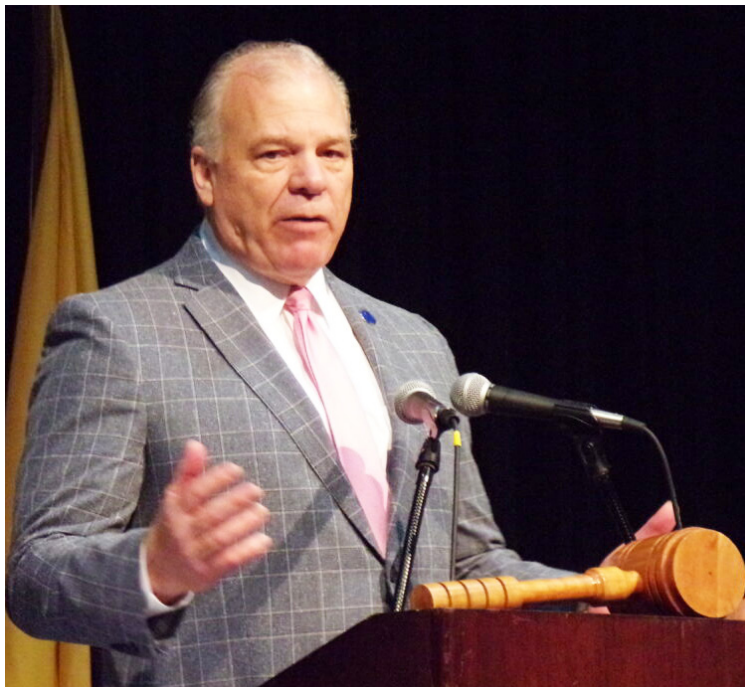




GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

THE CANDIDATE

Steve Sweeney **D**



Beaten in his 2021 state senate re-election bid, Steve Sweeney looked like a truck had run over him when he went to the podium to address the media. In fact, a truck had run over him, or at least a nonunion over-the-road truck driver named Ed Durr, a Republican who exploited the arrogance of power on his way to registering that night's most shocking upset.

Sweeney might have digested the loss as evidence that his time had come to an end, but the old ironworker decided to see it as part of a blast furnace process,

which ultimately made him stronger, not weaker. Was it delusional? At the height of his power, while sitting on the throne of the senate presidency, Sweeney registered little more than the sound of one hand clapping when he ran in the 2017 gubernatorial race, bowing out of the contest in late 2016. Now, just as his old pal Chris Christie continued to nurse presidential ambitions only to collapse in the snows of New Hampshire, Sweeney could not eradicate from his mind that Thomas Hart Benton image of himself and his mates playing horseshoes in bowler hats and suspenders in the backyard of Drumthwacket.

It seemed forced.

Or did it?

Sweeney actually had command of New Jersey economic and budget issues, and routinely demonstrated a willingness to run into the fire to debate them. In 2019, he introduced his Path to Progress report, which targeted specific ways to reduce taxes and improve the state's financial footing. The detailed and impressive blueprint recommended pension and benefit, shared government services, and tax structure reforms.

Say what you will about his machine politics foundations and the optics now of his nose pressed against the window

of power since his 2021 loss, Sweeney would not speak in platitudes on the pertinent economic issues of the day.

From New Jersey Business Magazine:

“The most important thing we needed to do was to start making the full Actuarially Required Contribution on our state pension payment, and we are getting to 100% in the upcoming FY 2022 budget. That’s a year earlier than we expected to get there until the 10-year ramp-up launched under the last administration. Once I realized how strong revenues were coming in, I urged the governor to do it. We will save billions by making the full contribution a year early, just as we are

saving \$13 billion over 30 years by the legislation we passed requiring quarterly pension payments. We still need to make reforms to our pension system, including implementing a hybrid pension plan for new employees that combines a traditional defined benefit pension on the first \$40,000 of income and a 401K-style cash balance account on income above \$40,000 that workers can take with them if they leave.”

Consider, too, his strong Building Trades labor credentials. As he announced his retirement from political office last year, fellow labor leader Assemblyman Tom GIBLIN had this to say: “There’s no two ways about it, the Democratic Party’s success is attribut-

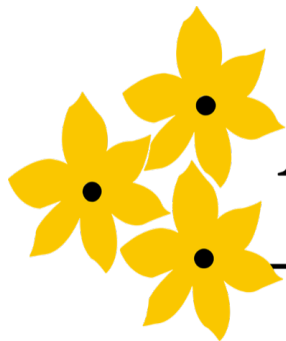
ed to 100% commitment of organized labor... Sometimes people get political Alzheimers. If Democrats get complacent and don’t realize the importance of organized labor, they’re making a fatal mistake.”

One more thing:

Their detractors all but buried South Jersey Democrats before last year, when Sweeney’s slate mate, John BURZICHELLI, reclaimed the 3rd District senate seat Sweeney lost; and Paul MORIARTY nabbed the neighboring 4th District seat to keep it in the D column.

They always said the South would rise again.





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THE CANDIDATE

Steven Fulop **D**



When he threw Jerry Healy out of the Jersey City Mayor's Office back in 2013, Fulop gave off a well-earned neon rising star gleam.

He had what so many well-fed, morose, and work-averse machine-forged politicians didn't have, including the following: U.S. Marine service in Iraq, a private sector profile, real grassroots credentials, which went as deep as his insistence on backing candidates and winning school board races, his obvious political coherence as a councilman representing downtown, and his

own linkage to Jersey City mythology – in the truest sense – as a hardcore ally of the late Mayor Glenn Cunningham.

Mr. Cunningham was campaigning with Fulop on a bicycle when he died from a massive heart attack.

Then there was Fulop's willingness to take on powerful politicians, among them Menendez and George Norcross III. While others quailed and protected their public sector jobs by staying silent, Fulop didn't mind poking bullies in

the eye, starting with those two grand poohbahs of political pomp. In their earliest tilts back in 2016, Fulop made Sweeney look like the ultimate stooge by contrast, a caricature of the shadow of a henchman who stands with folded arms behind the wizards of Oz.

But it all turned into a gruesome mudslide of disappointment when Fulop quite suddenly – without any real explanation – disappeared from the pre-primary field and materialized alongside Phil Murphy to endorse the second coming of Jon

Corzine, who offered the apparent bonus of a personality. A creation of Goldman Sachs who rather unconvincingly bragged about having grown up “middle class on a good day,” Murphy triumphant represented a victory for the forces of cynicism. The candidate for governor would not be the organically conceived kid from Jersey made good on his own terms – tough to do in this swamp of eternal compromise – but a grinning finance guy, unknown but for the flat monologues of his money.

What hurt even worse was to see Fulop standing next to him.

But life as we want to see it is not life as it is, and even if many insiders can't forgive Fulop's mysterious exit from the 2017 gubernatorial gladiatorial games, he nonetheless has a real record as mayor of Jersey City, conceivably an ungovernable place in lesser hands, which under his leadership shines as a flawed but sophisticated solar system of urban life, and far more than merely Manhattan spillover.

So far, Fulop – the first declared 2024 candidate for governor – has demonstrated substance.

Consider this from InsiderNJ Columnist Fred Snowflack:

The mayor and candidate is periodically releasing comprehensive positions. Before today's release on public safety, Fulop presented positions on transportation and housing.

Not all candidates do this. Steve Sweeney, who also is running for governor, announced his intentions in a video a few weeks ago, but as of now, there has not been much else. Detailed presentations are nice, but do people pay attention? After all, the election is not until 2025.

“There is a part of the voter base that does care,” Fulop said. His point is that those interested – or involved in any way with such things as housing, transportation, and now, public safety – are going to pay heed to what a man running for governor has to say about them.

But there's more.

Fulop says he's not running for governor just to sit in the seat; he wants to do things.

That got him talking about how in some ways, New Jersey, notwithstanding its staunch Democratic ways, has not been bold.

Talking about recent history, Fulop said it wasn't the Legislature and governor who instituted gay marriage and legalized marijuana. That was the courts and the voters respectively.

Moreover, he said New Jersey lagged behind other states in raising the minimum wage and introducing paid family leave.

If he becomes governor, he said constructive change will come from Trenton.

His housing plan, for instance, calls for doubling the amount of affordable homes in the state.

As for public safety, given the fact he's a mayor of the state's second largest city, Fulop has a record here. And it's one he's happy to talk about.

He said that crime is dropping across the board in his city.

Compared to last year, homicides in 2023 are down from 12 to 10 and shootings are down from 52 to 47. Also, car thefts dropped from 738 to 629 and burglaries from 828 to 725.

“This year, we had the lowest number of homicides Jersey City has ever seen since records have been kept. For the first time, Jersey City ranks lower than New York City for homicide rates. Additionally, the data shows we have the lowest homicide rate of the top 100 cities east of Texas,” the mayor said.

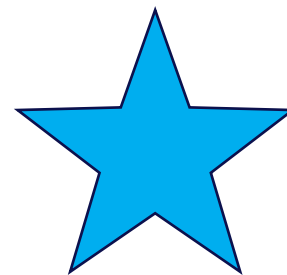
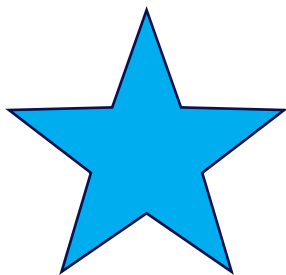
Will it be enough? In this world of party organizations that materialize candidacies on rigid lines, like water parceled through Roman aqueducts, Fulop, once the teetotaling toast of that progressive space between Gen. X and Gen Z., a star once photographed with Clinton, as Clinton once posed with Kennedy, transmits little more than a decided longshot vibe, crammed into a fuel-efficient car in a political traffic jam orchestrated by – what else – the party machine.



**Agudath Israel
of America**
New Jersey Office

THE CANDIDATE

Mikie Sherrill **D**



If the 2016 version of Fulop represented the romantic projectionist's view of what we would want our statewide leader to be rather than what he really is, the eve of 2024 and the incipient stages of 2025 offered Sherrill as that close to perfect emblem of leadership.

For starters, Sherrill had a distinguished military background as a Navy helicopter pilot, which put the usual political crumb bums on notice. Those trying to gain traction by being a boss' favorite disciple now had to compete with

a person – a woman, no less, and married mother of four – who actually came to the dance as – get this – *a public servant*.

While those schooled only in the political bloodstream of New Jersey transactionalism tried to start fights with aging military veterans in the State Capitol, Sherrill presented a stunning new idea: love of country. Now, with this strange profile – accompanied by a record at the U.S. Attorney's Office – in short, the owner of a tangible resume, not to mention her historic

2018 victory over a long-serving Republican incumbent and congressional service, Sherrill ran the risk of exposing the men in New Jersey politics as a bog of quagmired hacks.

That's dangerous.

There's nothing like the threat of a jolt of reality to threaten the waistband-bulging remnants of humanity crowding the cigar bars.

In a state in which the Democratic Party united behind two

Goldman Sachs candidates for governor, and left the last woman who ran for the job high and dry as they catered to the political compulsions of Chris Christie, could Sherrill penetrate the cynicism, cowardice, and laziness of her own party?

Her presence in Congress alone represented a positive development. In addition, she appeared to have the backing of powerful Essex County Democratic Committee Chairman LeRoy Jones,

chair of the Democratic State Committee. Jones had waged some real fights with others in the political establishment, including South Jersey's George Norcross III and Sweeney. For Sherrill, the upside of Jones' support also presented the possibility of other county leaders falling prey to the influence of those seeking to exact revenge on Jones.

A year ahead of the year in question, Sherrill began her quest for the governorship with a powerful

ally behind her, and a fight ahead, which is really all she's ever had in politics, anyway, starting with her expulsion of Rodney Frelinghuysen, beatdown of Trump supporter Jay Webber, and continued hands-on protection of the district she flipped in her party's favor.

At the end of 2023, the nascent Sherrill campaign began highlighting her work to make child-care more affordable for working families.





ACLU

New Jersey

THE CANDIDATE

Josh Gottheimer **D**



InsiderNJ just had a conversation a few days ago with a party boss who described a recent visit from the 5th District congressman as intellectually stimulating and politically persuasive. Like his congressional colleague Mikie Sherrill, Gottheimer late last year decided against pursuing the U.S. Senate seat after Bob Menendez spectacular implosion.

Instead, he's running for governor.

Not a declared candidate yet, he nonetheless very actively contin-

ues to make the rounds.

The upside?

He hails from Bergen, one of the big Northern counties integral to Democratic Party success in a primary. Like Sherrill, he flipped the switch on a Republican incumbent, dimming the GOP lights in the 5th District and supplanting demagoguery with pragmatism. Relying on a combination of fundraising, problem solving caucus credentials transcending party affiliation, and aggressive cam-

paiging, he held onto his seat in some tough political weather, including the inevitable backlash against incumbent Joe Biden in 2022. Unlike Tom Malinowski, who lacked an inside game come redistricting, Gottheimer proved sharp elbowed and Machiavellian, too, when it came time to influence those chieftains drawing up a map for the next ten years.

Issues-oriented, the congressman from Bergen has focused perhaps more than of his colleagues on trying to reinstate the SALT

(State and Local Property Tax) deduction, and wrenching congressional control away from what he terms “moocher states.” In addition, he has worked with the Biden Administration on moving forward with long-stalled critical infrastructure improvement jobs,

including the more than \$12 billion Gateway Tunnel project.

The downside?

Gottheimer comes from a conservative district and his insiders describe many of his political stanc-

es as too conservative or middle of the road to excite the Democratic Party base in a primary.

But his supporters point out that he will have access to money that will enable him to morph him into anything he wants.





**GENOVA
BURNS**

THE CANDIDATE

Bill Spadea **R**



The apoplectically pro Trump 101.5 FM radio man would have to give up his day job to run for governor, and maybe he will.

He's all but said he's running.

Going back to 2004 when he unsuccessfully ran against then-incumbent U.S. Rep. Rush Holt in the 12th District, Spadea has projected an elected office gleam, short-circuited when he made a 2011 play for a state Assembly vacancy.

To that end, Matt Friedman of Politico noted earlier this year:

Two groups closely aligned with Bill Spadea, a pro-Trump radio host who is laying the groundwork to run for New Jersey governor in 2025, have raised more than \$320,000 between them since they were founded earlier this year.

It's an impressive sum for the ambitious Spadea, who frequently travels the state to give speeches at Republican functions while espousing an-

ti-vaccine rhetoric and promoting former President Donald Trump's lie that the 2020 election was stolen. And the sum — made up mostly of small online donations — contrasts favorably with one of Spadea's likely 2025 gubernatorial rival, Jack Ciattarelli, whose own political action committee has raised a fraction of that amount.

But for all his Trump saber-rattling and tit for tat leapfrogging around the state in an attempt to compete with Ciattarelli, Spadea had a less

than impressive 2023.

Notes InsiderNJ's Snowflack:

“The radio host and possible GOP gubernatorial candidate strongly supported a number of candidates challenging the Re-

publican establishment. Many of them lost. See LD-24 and 26. That prompted state Sen. Jon Bramnick to call Spadea ‘some loudmouth on the radio’ at a Republican victory celebration. Spadea responded... on his radio show, calling Bramnick a ‘bitter

guy’ and saying the primary winners should welcome the losers back into the fold.”

As for his 2025 plans, the radio host is coy, telling a fellow Republican at an event in July, “The thought has crossed my mind.”





THE CANDIDATE

Jon Bramnick **R**



In 2022, raging Republican moderate Bramnick assumed the state senate seat formerly occupied by his longtime slate mate, U.S. Rep. Tom Kean, Jr. The veteran Republican eked out his amiable, competent brand over the course of a 20-year career in the state Assembly, capping it as a sturdy relationship builder in the role of Republican leader.

Impressed, insiders never saw Bramnick retiring without making at least one statewide bid.

Having formally kicked off his candidacy on Jan. 27th, Bramnick now evidently finally believes 2025 to be his time.

But Bramnick, who occupies the same pragmatic, middle-of-the-road space as Ciattarelli, will have to figure out a way to get around his former colleague in the Assembly. The two of them in a GOP Primary with Spadea in the race – or someone else in the movement conservative vein – could pose significant problems for what's left

of the ravaged Millicent Fenwick wing of the NJ Grand Old Party.

Bramnick is perhaps New Jersey's most consistently vociferous Republican anti Trumper, on more than one occasion making a cogent case from the floor of the Assembly for reason in the face of then-President Trump's frightening demagoguery.

He also bears longtime ties to the political apparatus of former Governor Chris Christie.

As the year closed, Bramnick focused his attention on youth mental health, mustering bipartisan support for S-3330/A-5015.

“Mental health has become a crisis in our nation,” Sen. Bramnick. “This legislation may be helpful when explaining the effects of loss to high school students.”

According to the Senate Republican Office, the Union-based senator worked with Imagine, a Center for Coping with Loss to craft the

legislation, which would instruct school districts to teach students how to cope with grief and loss.

The bill would require:

- Public school districts to teach lessons on grief for students in grades eight through twelve as part of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards in Comprehensive Health and Physical Education.

- The Commissioner of Education to provide age-appropriate resources to public school districts on mechanisms and techniques to use while dealing with symptoms of grief.
- Public school districts to provide in-school support, mental health crisis support, and individual and group therapy for students.





THE CANDIDATE

Craig Coughlin



Don't count out Coughlin, says a veteran source within the folds of the Statehouse inner sanctum, who sees in the hammered-together StayNJ deal the fundament of the sitting speaker's political acumen and public interest priority.

After Coughlin initially proposed a plan to assist senior citizens assailed by crippling costs, the Middlesex Democrat came together with a skeptical Governor Phil Murphy and Senate President

Nick Scutari to work up a modified version.

From NJSpotlight Anchor Briana Vannozzi:

"A tentative framework was reached... on the controversial 'StayNJ' senior property-tax cut plan, with Gov. Phil Murphy and Democratic legislative leaders still ironing out the details. According to a Murphy administration official, residents age 65 and older would get a 50% credit on prop-

erty-tax bills, capped at \$6,500; that's down from an initial proposal of \$10,000.

"The original plan had no income threshold but the latest iteration would apply to seniors making under \$500,000 a year and it would include money for senior renters who were excluded from the original 'StayNJ' plan. The tentative framework would also immediately boost the existing 'Anchor' tax relief program by \$250 for seniors."

Murphy didn't like Coughlin's proposal at the outset, publicly opposing it to the point of threatening a shutdown. But Coughlin persevered, and the compromise finally signed into law by the governor represented a win by a lowkey, reasonable Trenton player.

"What is missing here so far is the emergence of Coughlin," said the insider, noting how the disappearance of Steve Sweeney from the halls of the Statehouse after his 2021 election loss represented an opportunity for the speaker to carve out his own leadership path and policy priorities.

"This has placed Coughlin all over the state in terms of the opportunity," said the source. "This sets up Coughlin in a much bigger way, certainly to be considered for a fourth term as speaker in November but in addition, it sets him up as a gubernatorial candidate."

Coughlin kept his cool through the crisis, refusing to blow his stack when the governor said he would shut down the state. The speaker quietly held to a program that by the time it gets done could put \$200 a week back in the pockets of the average senior family.

"The governor's response of shutting the state down sent a hor-

rendous message, and Coughlin counterbalanced that," said the source.

Coughlin's savvy certainly scripted the likelihood of a fourth term on the speaker's chair.

But governor?

The source said Scutari and Coughlin are friends, and that if Scutari takes another stab at the senate presidency, that will remove the play for Middlesex to go after the position.

That leaves Coughlin with two possibilities: Speaker (again) or Governor.

"The governor, God bless him, his power will erode, and the presence of an experienced leader becomes more and more necessary," said the source. "And we see that here with Coughlin, based on StayNJ – someone who should be there for a fourth term. Middlesex will support that, and given his reasonableness – a highly elusive quality in politics and government – he shows himself to be a leader who can function at the level of governor. He is not only a reasonable individual, but a reasonable individual who knows the levers of government. With all respect to Murphy, the sitting governor

didn't know government when he got in there, and right now, longer term, Coughlin, I think, is going in the direction of governor."

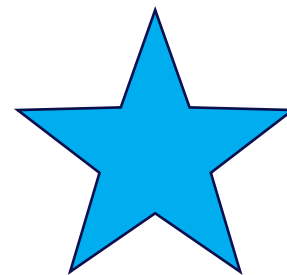
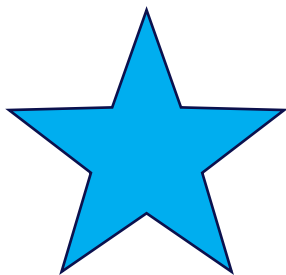
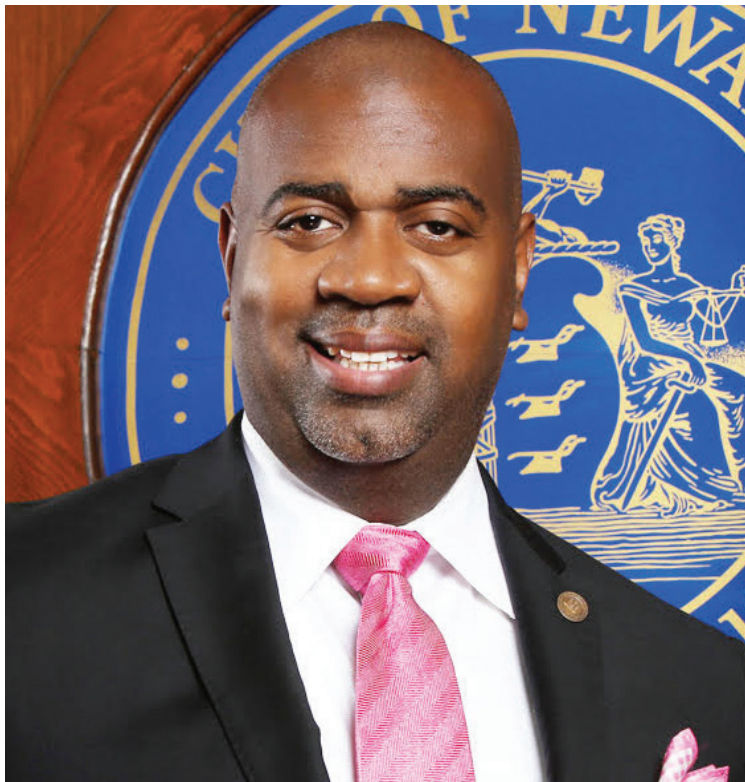
A bolstered majority in 2023 only strengthened Coughlin's argument toward higher office, and – if nothing else – burnished his campaign messaging credentials. Middlesex Democrats' decision to augment their party's case for reproductive freedom with a specifically economic program in the form of StayNJ, shows that they're not slumbering in the hidden chambers of Trenton.

Sweeney was supposed to be the only Democrat who could talk turkey about taxpayer affordability issues, but if Coughlin gets in the race, the former senate president will have to prepare himself to joust with the sitting speaker.

That said, Coughlin appears to be only a longshot candidate for governor, perhaps a panic button option for Middlesex of a savory deal falls apart and all hell breaks loose in the Democratic Party. As insiders routinely point out, mild-mannered to a fault, Coughlin might have a problem on the campaign trail trying to energize the churches in a showdown with someone like the eternally electric Ciattarelli.

THE CANDIDATE

Ras Baraka **D**



Inner circle Baraka acolytes insist the Newark Mayor still intends to run for governor in 2025. Against an uptick of chatter around his fledgling candidacy, Unite PAC, founded in support of Newark Mayor Ras Baraka's prioritized causes, threw a fundraiser on Sept. 18th at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

The theme?

"Moving New Jersey Forward." Insiders chattered overtime. Essentially, if they don't live in Essex County, they are eager to point out that a Baraka 2025 gubernatorial candidacy would hurt fellow Essex resident U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-11).

Two heavyweights trying to gain a statewide edge out of Essex would impair a muscled-up appearance by

Sherrill, as the anticipated preference by the Essex County Democratic Committee.

In establishment circles, the nascent, upstart statewide candidacy of Baraka continues to trigger discussions around the potential for U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-5) to break out in more convincing fashion, or Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-19) to make something happen.

What about the only truly declared candidate in the contest, Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop?

Certainly, Baraka does not appear to help him, either, as two big city mayors running off the line, apparently in search of progressive, anti-establishment support, don't inure to Fulop's (or Baraka's) ad-

vantage. Do Fulop and Baraka somewhat nullify each other to enable a prevailing line? Those are the drunken cocktail conversations happening right now, in advance of the Newark Mayor's next move.

Again, for the moment, that move found him fundraising in his

hometown in September (suggested donation \$2,000; an exclusive VIP reception with the mayor \$10K), with obvious statewide designs.

At least one source told InsiderNJ that heavy Baraka strategy sessions percolated in Essex in the lead up to year's end.



CLOSING THOUGHTS



This contains only a partial list of those people primed at this particular moment. Others, among them state Senator Mike Testa (R-1) and Senator Holly Schepisi (R-39) could emerge this year. Certainly, Schepisi and Testa radiate prime time potential on the strength of their work in the senate. At the start of a new year and in the wake of Republicans' less than stellar showing in legislative contests, sources talked about Testa as an option for state Republican chair. If it happens, the South Jerseyan from Vineland would have a statewide platform and some time to get his name

ID up and generate some enthusiasm toward a bid for governor.

The resuscitation of South Jersey Democrats this year on the strength of senate wins by Assemblymen John Burzichelli (3) and Paul Moriarty (4) (see above) gives the appearance of a somewhat reanimated region for Sweeney and his allies. That's a new dynamic after abysmal showings by the south going back at least to 2019. But remember, even at full strength, Sweeney couldn't get the attention of northern bosses, and the guess here is that his candidacy perhaps more than

anything gives the reemergent south a chance to play for putting a name in the mix for AG in the next governor's administration, with an additional Department of Labor commissionership in the offing for the former senate president.

What happens in the 2024 presidential season could boomerang profoundly in 2025, those two seasons usually linked by an underlying voter sense of balance and proportion, but Trump in the presidential contest presents, as always, a rather zany – and scary – wildcard...more later.