

WT GOP slams POD fees

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By Jessica Beym

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WASHINGTON TWP. Republican candidates for mayor and council came out in support of the local business community Tuesday as they met at a Delsea Drive business to oppose a new tax enacted by the all-Democratic council.

Mayoral candidate Theresa Lappe and council candidates Joseph Bowe and Giancarlo D'Orazio said the current council should rescind its decision to place a monthly tax on local businesses that have storage trailers, or PODs, on their properties.

"We feel Washington Township has unfairly targeted the local businesses and put a burdensome cost on them," said Lappe. "This is a very difficult economic time and many businesses are already struggling."

The candidates gathered at Tri-State Fire Protection, a local fire-equipment company, along with Republican freeholder candidate Larry Wallace and about 15 members of the business community. The local Republicans are running against Democrats Matthew Lyons for mayor, and Scott Newman and Ray MacDowell for council.

The council passed an ordinance in May that requires property owners in both commercial and residential areas to obtain permits, at a cost, before putting storage trailers on their property. Commercial property owners must also pay a monthly fee for the square footage of the PODs.

For Nicholas Bozine, owner of Tri-State Fire Protection, that means a monthly bill of \$1,595 for his five storage trailers and close to \$20,000 for one year.

After the ordinance was enacted, the members of the business community formed an ad hoc alliance to fight the tax. The township council has put a hold on the ordinance and intended to work out a solution with the business community, but the business owners have since retained a lawyer.

Township solicitor John Eastlack said Tuesday that the township council will be introducing amendments to the ordinance at its meeting on Thursday. The changes will

still require application and permit renewal fees, and a monthly fee of \$.50 per square foot, instead of \$1.

Tom Drissel, the spokesman for the alliance and owner of Drissel's Ace Hardware, said the township council should have approached them before enacting the ordinance.

"This was sprung on us without asking our opinion," Drissel said. "The entire ordinance was just outrageous."

Bowe said the process would place a hardship on the small business community, and that the township should work with them rather than against them.

"It's called community relations," Bowe said. "Let's work together."

D'Orazio agreed, saying the elected officials should work to help businesses grow.

"Township council has already subjected business owners to a large tax increase," D'Orazio said of the proposed tax hike for the 2008 budget. "It's time for the local government to reduce taxes and help bring in new businesses."

Drissel said it was "gratifying" to have the support of the Republican candidates, but the business owners don't believe it's a partisan issue.

"We'd like the opportunity to talk to the Democrats as well," Drissel said. "This is not a partisan fight we're in."

Lyons, the Democratic mayoral candidate, said in a phone interview that the township shouldn't be balancing its books by placing taxes on the local businesses.

"I don't think it's fair, prudent or wise to balance the budget on the backs of a handful of business owners who live and work in the community, provide jobs and are struggling like the rest of us," Lyons said. "I think there has to be more communication with local businesses, particularly small local businesses, when these things come up."

The township council will meet Thursday at 7 p.m. in the municipal building, 523 Egg Harbor Road.