

Suburban

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Council focuses on MUA at New Year's session

Greene appointed; panel may be formed to explore agency's dissolution
BY LAUREN CIRAULO

The Old Bridge Township Council's annual reorganization meeting ushered in changes not only to the governing body, but to the Old Bridge Municipal Utilities Authority (OBMUA).

At the New Year's Day meeting, Republican Councilman Richard Greene was appointed to serve a five-year term as a second alternate member on the independently run OBMUA, beating out three other nominees — former Councilman William Baker, last year's OBMUA second alternate Michela Lane, and resident Linda Seiler.

"I'm very happy I was appointed. I've been a liaison for a few years, and I think I have a good feel for their operations," Greene said. "Surprisingly, it was a bipartisan effort [to appoint me]."

Indeed, Democratic Councilman Reginald Butler's choice for OBMUA alternate member crossed party lines. With Butler's support, and the addition of Republican Mary Sohor on the council, Greene was able to garner the majority vote.

Some on the governing body questioned whether the council should have such a great presence on the OBMUA, since Councilman Edward Testino is a member and Butler serves as first alternate. Greene said there are no restrictions on the number of council members who could hold seats, and he sees no negative impact from their presence.

"What it comes down to is if you're the best person for the job. And I think I am best suited for the position. I have experience with the OBMUA and I have a background in budgeting and finance, which I could use to the advantage of the authority," Greene said. The councilman said that during his term he would ensure that the agency is run properly and remains financially stable.

"In these financial times, we want to make sure that every dollar that residents spend on water and sewer is worth it," Greene said.

But according to Mayor Jim Phillips, the more pressing concern was whether Greene had a conflict of interest. Greene's son works for the OBMUA, and such a connection could be brought to the township Ethics Board, Phillips said.

"There may be challenges to his appointment in the future, and if it's brought up, it's up to the Ethics Board to decide," Phillips said. "His son doesn't live with him, which changes the game, but knowing Old Bridge, it would not shock me if someone contested the appointment in the future."

In addition to Greene, OBMUA member Rocco Donatelli was reappointed to another five year term. Other members include Kiran Desai, Thomas Galante and President Nicholas Smolney.

A change in its makeup was not the only notable OBMUA-related event at the meeting. Some members of the council suggested the possibility of making the autonomous body a township-run organization — a proposal that reflects issues raised last fall. In mid-September, the council voted to withdraw \$1.3 million from the OBMUA reserve fund and instead use it for tax relief.

Phillips, a Democrat, said the transfer would be best used to avoid a municipal tax hike. Greene opposed the move, saying the OBMUA needs the surplus money for emergency use and to keep water and sewer

rates stable in the future. Some residents and officials also said they were troubled by what they considered to be a large amount of surplus in the OBMUA's reserve fund, money that some felt could be given back to residents. Due to these circumstances, several residents called for the dissolution of the OBMUA, suggesting that Old Bridge follow in the steps of other towns, such as Monroe, Marlboro and Hazlet, which recently absorbed similar authorities in favor of running the operations as part of the township government.

"Hazlet and Monroe successfully dissolved their authorities. It can be done with Old Bridge also," said resident Margarita Batista. "The Township Council could oversee the utility budget and fund it through quarterly fees, not monthly taxes. There would be a greater level of accountability and transparency."

The Township Council is responding by establishing a committee that will focus on exploring different ways to run the authority, a move suggested by newly elected council President G. Kevin Calogera. While no decisions have been made regarding the makeup of the committee, the council is expected to include a resolution for the body on the agenda in the near future.

"We're going to find out if it's cheaper to run the authority through the township," Phillips said. "With the way things are going in Marlboro Township, it seems a lot of money can be saved. We can lower rates or give tax breaks if it's run from the township."