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The Daily Journal

Tough, strong voices needed in Legislature

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In the heavily Democratic 3rd Legislative District, two years ago we endorsed Sen. Steve Sweeney and Assemblymen John Burzichelli and Douglas Fisher. They were a strong team in working successfully to secure projects of great economic importance for the district, which covers Salem County and parts of Cumberland and Gloucester counties.

Only the Assembly is up for re-election this time, and Fisher has moved on to head the state's Department of Agriculture. On the ticket with Burzichelli is Celeste Riley, a teacher and former president of the Bridgeton City Council, who was appointed to Fisher's Assembly seat earlier this year.

Facing them are Republicans Dr. Robert Villare and Lee Lucas. Villare, a surgeon, bucked the Republican organization to gain his seat, but now has the party's backing. Lucas is being treated as a pariah by his own party because of his extremist views and a police report (which lately he has denied) that he used a racial slur in a confrontation with a neighbor.

We remain concerned about Burzichelli holding two offices (he's also mayor of Paulsboro), but his performance overshadows that potential conflict. He is a member of the budget committee and one of the deputy speakers in the Assembly, a role that helps protect South Jersey's interests in a Legislature dominated of North Jersey politicians. He has helped to bring millions of dollars to the Bridgeton area for economic development and social services.

We also like the fact that he supports most of The Daily Journal's and Gannett New Jersey's 20-point plan to control spending and property taxes, including enacting measures to control growth of public employee salaries and a constitutional convention on property taxes.

We could easily endorse Celeste Riley under other circumstances. She would continue in Fisher's footsteps in watching out for Cumberland's interests.

But New Jersey is facing many financial and economic challenges -- billion-dollar budget deficits, growing debt and unfunded pension obligations in the tens of billions of dollars. That's even before considering state residents pay on average the highest property taxes in the country.

Fixing such problems will take not only Burzichelli's power but also some fresh approaches to government. That's why in this case we favor Republican Villare for the second Assembly seat.

He is a thinker who is exploding with ideas for improving health care in New Jersey, cutting taxes and creating jobs. A surgeon by trade, he has a good business sense grounded in the belief that lawmakers aren't listening to the people and government has to be more transparent. He definitely would bring a new perspective to Trenton.

It's also important that lawmakers reach across partisan political lines to get things done for their constituents and the common good. They won't always agree, but we believe Burzichelli and Villare will be able to work together for the good of constituents.

That's why we endorse John Burzichelli and Robert Villare for Assembly in the 3rd District.