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Trying to end the 'spoils system'

Ever since Andrew Jackson created what has become known as the "spoils system," the perception is that you need to "know someone" to get an appointment by city hall.

Democrats Jeff Grayzel and Ron Goldberg say they want to change that perception — at least in Morris Township where they sit on the Township Committee.

The Democrats back what they call the Citizen Service Act. If passed, the township would notify the public every time an opening occurs on any town board or committee. Interested residents would then be able to apply.

"It will ensure that all residents, not just those with connections, will be made aware of all volunteer positions available in the township," Grayzel says. "And our township will benefit by having the best-qualified people available, who can contribute their unique skills and expertise."

It's still a little hazy how the public will be made aware of vacancies on, say, the Planning Board or the Board of Adjustment. While putting them on the Web site is obvious, Grayzel says he'd like the town to directly notify residents who have been rejected for boards in the past. Grayzel reasons that if they had interest once, they may have interest again.

Democrats are outnumbered on the committee 3-2, so Grayzel and Goldberg need Republican support.

Some Republicans are not convinced there is a problem.

Mayor Scott Rosenbush says the proposal is "much ado about nothing," and it will merely formalize current procedure.

"The undercurrent that is being proffered¹ is specious," the mayor said.

At Wednesday's meeting, the committee agreed to table the measure until the Oct. 21 meeting. There was concern about something that seems minor — how would applicants not chosen be told? In short, some wanted that "rejection" note to come from the mayor, not the town clerk. Plans are to clarify the language by next month.

Rosenbush insisted before the meeting that the township traditionally considers all residents who volunteer to sit on boards, and as proof, he offered the name of Thomas Zelante.

Rosenbush said Zelante served on the township Board of Adjustment at the same time he was chairman of the Morris County Democratic Committee.

Grayzel wants to stop what he said just happened — the appointment of a Board of Adjustment member a few days after a vacancy occurred.

Not so, said Rosenbush. He said the post had been open for about two months.

Putting political considerations aside, there is a practical problem. No matter how many volunteers express interest in serving, the power to appoint rests with the mayor — and the mayor alone. So, if this mayor, or a future mayor, wants to appoint his or her buddies, so be it.

Grayzel admits that can happen, but he hopes that publicizing vacancies will produce a large crop of volunteers. And that will pressure, relatively speaking, the mayor to practice good government and to forget about giving jobs to his friends.

One can only hope so.
