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Morris Plains candidates ready for general election campaign

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Morris Plains Councilwoman Nancy Verga speaks to a crowd gathered for a backyard party to support the Morris Plains Democratic Committee Friday, June 10. To Verga's left is Mayor Jason Karr, and to Verga's right is Councilwoman Joan Goddard.

Photo courtesy of the Morris Plains Democratic Committee

MORRIS PLAINS – Morris Plains Democratic Committee Chair Christina Genest held a party at her home Friday, June 10, to celebrate all those who have supported the re-election of their Democratic candidates.

The party's candidates in the borough are Mayor Jason Karr and Councilwomen Joan Goddard and Nancy Verga, who are all seeking re-election in November after winning their respective primaries uncontested.

Republican Councilman Art Bruhn is challenging for Karr's seat as mayor, and Republicans Jim Myers and Jennifer Keating Meehan are challenging Goddard and Verga.

In the primary, Karr earned 426 votes while Bruhn earned 418. There were three write-ins for mayor for Democrats, and there were four for Republicans.

Verga earned 438 votes, and Goddard earned 436.

Myers earned 458 votes while Meehan earned 436. Three write-in votes were cast.

The Republican candidates will host a party at the Morris Plains VFW at 45 Tabor Road, and attendees can RSVP at <https://tinyurl.com/22br2e29>.

"I just want to thank you all on behalf of the Morris Plains Democratic Committee for coming and supporting us, supporting all the activities that we do, and supporting our candidates," Genest said. "It means the world to us."

Some elected officials said they've just begun campaigning for this year's election; however, Karr said he started campaigning the day he took office four years ago.

Karr said two of his four years as mayor were "engulfed with Covid." He added that acquiring the role as Mayor has its challenges, but the addition of COVID-19 was an added challenge. However, he remains proud of the work he's accomplished.

Karr said that while he has been mayor, more than 25 businesses have opened in Morris Plains. The same day as the party, a cookie business called Crumbl Cookies held its grand opening in the Kohl's shopping center on Route 10. Karr called it "a vibrant shopping center," and noted how other strip malls and small businesses are closing.

Karr mentioned that Cigna Insurance will move into one of Morris Plains' office buildings, which would bring 2,000 jobs to the area. About 86 jobs were also created with the opening of Crumbl Cookies, he said.

Even though Covid caused plans to change in some aspects, Karr has visions for the future of Morris Plains if re-elected. He's looking to provide some new playground equipment, update municipal buildings with funding money, and install broadband within the town center to play music and for parade speakers.

Karr explained the role of the mayor and what people expect from someone in this position, such as attending events around town and being involved.

"I was a councilman for 11 years prior to being mayor," Karr said. "And I've always tried to be at all the events . . . It shows that you care."

Providing support to local events and organizations is important to Karr, and he enjoys the sense of community, as well as campaigning. He also said he loves going door to door and tries to hit every door in the borough.

"People have ideas. People want to talk. People want to get stuff off their chest and give you pointers, ideas, concerns, and complaints as well, which is good," Karr said. "So, it's been a good excuse to get around and really talk to anybody and get a real feel for what the town's feeling."

Verga said they've been working on finding "new ways to communicate with residents and keep them connected." Knocking on doors is one way they try to gather input to see what residents want them to work on.

"People have been really supportive of the work we've done so far in our first term," Verga said.

Verga noted how an elected official is in a "service leadership position," which means being committed to serving the community, upholding integrity, and being a good listener.

"You're their voice," Verga said. "You're not there to push your own agenda. You're serving residents."

Besides practicing these qualities of a leader with residents, Verga said relationships with colleagues are important. With Verga and Goddard being the only Democrats on the council, she said “respectfully debating,” understanding the other member’s positions, and establishing trust is rewarding.

Verga was the ordinance chair for deciding whether to allow legal cannabis sales, manufacturing, or growing in Morris Plains. She created a Cannabis Advisory Group with people running the group ranging from a business owner, police chief, residents, the planning board and board of adjustment.

“I felt much more comfortable making a decision knowing that everyone had collective input to it,” Verga said.

The governing body also applied for a grant to the Board of Public Utilities, which will help them achieve the goal of 100 percent clean energy for New Jersey by 2050. They have 18 months to create a plan.

“There’s a lot more that we feel we can do,” Goddard said. “And we’re really proud of our accomplishments.”

Goddard said the borough’s website hadn’t been updated since 2002, and because they don’t have a business administrator, they were tasked with finding the vendor, collaborating with them on content, testing, and making the site user-friendly.

They incorporated some information that was received by residents regarding making the website a more pleasant experience, such as accessible forms that were easy to fill out and submit, better ways to find out about events, and online payment.

Goddard said some members of the Republican Party believe the Democrats want to “come in and change everything.” Her view is that they just want to tweak certain areas in need of improvement and make things easier for residents.

“We live here too,” Goddard said. “But we do want to make Morris Plains accessible for all. We want everyone to be welcome.”

Goddard acknowledged that for years, “a lot of things were done by the same people and the same committees in the same way;” however, many of those things were still done well. Certain activities from 30 years ago, she said, such as Family Day, the Labor Day Party, and the farmers market, are all activities they love. They are simply hoping to evolve, Goddard said.

GOP Candidates

Councilman Bruhn, a regional sales manager at Empire Tool Rental in the Bronx, said after filing for candidacy in April that he enjoys living in Morris Plains and wants to keep the small town feel that his son Jack has enjoyed growing up in and many other families have enjoyed.

“I feel that becoming mayor will also allow me to continue helping our residents,” Bruhn said. “I feel that my degree in accounting and my experience working in finance will give me the advantage to make sure we are being fiscally conservative with our spending. I have five years of experience as a councilman and two of which I have chaired the finance committee. I feel strongly that I can continue to keep our taxes low so that our seniors and young people can live in Morris Plains.”

Bruhn said he has devoted many years of his life helping people through the fire department and through his years of service as a councilman.

He first joined the council in 2018 and served as council president in 2020.

Bruhn has also been a member of the Website Committee since 2020 and was the chairman of the Finance Committee in 2020 and 2021.

“I love living in Morris Plains and want to continue to make the town known as the ‘Community of Caring’ a special place to live,” Bruhn said. “I enjoy the many special events that we offer, athletic fields that our children play on and the parks our residents enjoy. I want to ensure these traditions continue and that the parks and athletic fields are kept in the best conditions possible for future generations to enjoy.”

After filing for candidacy, Myers said he grew up in the borough and has been involved in many different ways throughout the past 15 years having done coaching and working with children when his kids were younger; now that his kids are in high school and college, he has more time opened up to look at other ways to get involved in the community, he said.

"One of the main things is downtown," Myers said. "We have a downtown that could be thriving, that could be the envy of a lot of towns around. However, due to a lot of things, it's taken a downturn, and we really need to bring it back to where it was and be able to take pride in our downtown and the shops and services that we have there. And so that's one of the main reasons for coming in, but also to really work to maintain what we have over the course of my 50 some odd years."

Myers said the borough needs to start thinking outside the box about the different services and stores that it's inviting in, and the borough needs to give incentives to businesses coming in while also working with current landlords to make sure their properties are more enticing to move into the areas.

"We have the people; we have the infrastructure; we have the shoppers," Myers said. "We can make businesses last, and we can offer a lot to business owners as a community. But what we can't do is we can't control the landlords; we can't control the rent. So I think we need to be working closely with those landowners to not only beautify their properties but to entice businesses to come to them not just look for the town to make those offers as well because while it might be a tax write-off for them, it's definitely not bringing them any money to have an empty lot sitting there."

Keating Meehan said after filing to run that she wants to make sure the quality of life that residents are used to continues and that the borough continues to maintain what it has to offer including parks so children have places to be together outdoors, as well as first responders and emergency services.

"I went through the school system and really was privileged to have the sense of familiarity that the community provided a quality education and really just the upbringing at the parks doing things with friends in a safe environment," she said.

Keating Meehan retired from AT&T as a service executive after a 33-year career in which she held positions in service management, customer relations, contract management and financial reporting. In 2018, she returned to AT&T where she currently works as an independent contractor.

"I think that I do have good leadership skills," Keating Meehan said. "I have a 33-year career with AT&T, and I've had a variety of positions, a lot of them dealing with a large number of direct reports. So I think that I have the ability to communicate with individuals and compromise and lead, in a sense."