

2010

Mahwah council candidate sign thefts lead to arrest

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Mahwah — In any hotly contested election, acts of political vandalism are commonplace.

This year is no exception.

Sign thefts and vandalism have been reported by at least two candidates for Township Council [REDACTED], who is seeking his first four-year term, and incumbent [REDACTED] who is seeking a second term.

On Tuesday, April 27, a 32-year-old woman was arrested and charged with theft after witnesses reported observing her removing campaign signs for [REDACTED] police said.

Police Chief James Batelli said he did not believe the department has ever made an arrest in connection with a campaign sign theft before.

[REDACTED], who police said is from Hoboken but who was described by her attorney as a lifelong resident of Mahwah, was released on her own recognizance after being interviewed by detectives. According to police, she admitted taking a handful of signs.

Michael J. Beatrice, who is representing [REDACTED] in the disorderly persons case, said his client will plead not guilty. He said Charles "allegedly" removed the signs "out of frustration" because their quantity and locations "offended [REDACTED] sense of pride and her concern for the township's aesthetic."

[REDACTED] said about 80 of his campaign signs were removed over the weekend of April 23 in proximity to the Mahwah train station on Franklin Turnpike, and that they were removed in a specific pattern, "as if you could drive your car right in that straight line."

[REDACTED] said he learned his campaign signs were being removed from Township Council president [REDACTED], who is also running for one of the four seats available in the May 11 election.

[REDACTED] said he received a phone call from someone who said a woman was taking campaign signs and placing them in her vehicle. The witness gave [REDACTED] the license plate number of the vehicle, he said.

[REDACTED] said these kinds of antics are commonplace during campaign season.

"Every election signs go missing," he said. "It's not abnormal — we buy 500 signs and expect 100 to go missing."

[REDACTED] said he bought approximately 550 signs at a cost of \$3.50-\$4 each.

"I think what's missing is that they're not 'my' signs," he said. "I have supporters who donated money to get those signs. You're stealing from the other people in Mahwah, too, who are supporters."

Beatrice, however, said that the early placement of signs, three weeks before the school board elections, as well as the number of them and their placement on public property was "contrary to the longstanding political history and tradition in Mahwah."

"The four signs [REDACTED] is alleged to have removed were from a candidate who was apparently not aware of this tradition. They were of a volume that was unprecedented from recent elections," he said.

Beatrice also said the signs were not destroyed or thrown away; they were returned to Weixeldorfer for proper placement.

"This was not a politically motivated act," he said.

Beatrice said the case highlights a question of ownership regarding political signage.

"Do they belong to the candidate, or the people on whose property the sign was placed? If a candidate puts a sign on my front yard without my permission and I want to remove it without his permission, have I stolen that sign? There's a question whether signs placed on public property become abandoned. This is not a criminal act and it should not be treated as such."

[REDACTED] is scheduled to appear in municipal court on May 12.

Batelli said that [REDACTED] admitted to taking "approximately five signs," which she returned after charges were filed. He said no other



Campaign signs like those located in the vicinity of the train station apparently offended one person's "sense of pride" to such a degree she allegedly removed them — and was subsequently arrested and charged with theft.

charges would be brought against her in relation to other campaign signs that have reportedly been removed.

██████████ has reported that approximately 80-100 signs were taken over a period of time," Batelli said April 29. "There was no indication or evidence that we could move forward with that would indicate ██████████ was involved in any additional theft of signs."

Former council vice president ██████████, now a Bergen County freeholder, said he witnessed ██████████ replacing several of Weixeldorfer's campaign signs with signs supporting Kidd, and that he followed her after becoming "very intrigued." He said he then witnessed her removing signs in three or four other spots around town.

Batelli said his department was "not prepared to say this actually occurred."

██████████ also denied that signs supporting him were supplanting those supporting ██████████, saying the police had not contacted him.

"I don't think it's true because if it was, the police would probably have called me in for a comment or a statement," ██████████ said. "The police never did that."

██████████ said his campaign signs were defaced the previous week in the vicinity of Franklin Turnpike and Miller Road, where ██████████ lives. He also said a nearby bank's sign was plastered with "Dump Kidd" bumper stickers.

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