

Fulop Opposes 2 Proposed New Taxes

Monday, June 12, 2006

JARRETT RENSHAW

Jersey Journal

Downtown Councilman Steven Fulop, who is frequently at odds with the city's administration, will ask the City Council this week to voice its opposition to a proposed city payroll tax and increase in the real estate transfer fee.

"In a year in which Jersey City residents are hit with an 18 percent tax hike from the city and another 9 percent from the county, this proposed legislation would directly and unfairly further impact our homeowners and businesses," Fulop said.

Fulop said he will attempt to introduce a resolution at Wednesday night's City Council meeting opposing the two bills. One bill would increase the real estate transfer fee, while the other includes the hotel tax and payroll tax.

He said he supports the hotel tax, but it's tied to the payroll tax.

Jersey City Mayor Jerramiah Healy, who has pushed the bills, said that Fulop is doing a disservice to his constituents.

"I respect Steve's right to disagree, but not just for the sake of disagreeing," Healy said.

Healy said the real estate transfer fee "is something he should get behind and he's only hurting the people he represents."

Healy supports that fee as well as the hotel tax, but has not stated where he stands on the payroll tax.

Fulop responded, "The mayor has never seen a tax he didn't like."

7 SIDE WITH TROY

Fulop notes all seven ran with Healy, rips chief anew

Friday, January 27, 2006

By KEN THORBOURNE

THE JERSEY JOURNAL

Jersey City Police Chief Robert Troy is doing a bang-up job in eyes of seven of the nine City Council members - despite 39 murders last year, the most since 1982.

The Troy backers went public with their "wholehearted support" for the police chief of 15 months at the council's Wednesday night meeting, the same day Ward E Councilman Steven Fulop called for Troy to step down.

Reading from a letter signed by every council member except Fulop and Ward F Councilwoman Viola Richardson, Ward D Councilman William Gaughan said: "Realizing the complexity of the duties of the chief of police, (we) wish to express our wholehearted support for Chief Robert Troy.

"We realize crime does not exist in a vacuum. We further understand there are societal and economic factors which impact crime totals."

In front of roughly 15 attendees at the meeting - many of whom told their own tales of brushes with gunfire and dope dealers - Fulop noted that those who signed the letter all ran on Mayor Jerramiah Healy's ticket in May.

"I resent that, Steve," Ward A Councilman Michael Sottolano shot back. "I'm independent."

Fulop stuck to his guns, saying serious crime in the city has been trending upwards, a fact police acknowledged in a budget hearing held earlier this month.

"At some point someone has to be accountable," Fulop said. "Numbers don't lie."

In a three-page letter submitted to The Jersey Journal, Troy wrote that Fulop's words "not only undermine the public's confidence in the Police Department, but also negatively affect the morale of the men and women who comprise the Jersey City Police Department."

Noting that the department has hired 150 new officers, Troy - quoting a newspaper article - attributed a spike in violent crimes to a "confluence of disturbing trends in New Jersey and other states," namely the rise of gangs and gun violence.

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Frank talk about crime is overdue

Monday, January 30, 2006

Jersey Journal Editorial

Jersey City Councilman Steve Fulop's call for the head of Police Chief Robert Troy has certainly set off an emotional firestorm in the city.

Residents say they have had enough of the rapes, shooting and murders in the city. They say they live in fear in some neighborhoods and blame drug dealers and youth gangs. These people support Fulop's effort to center on crime as one of the top issues in the city.

Backers of Troy, including many of the politicians who put him in office and officers in the city, call him a professional lawman and say he is doing the best he can. They charge Fulop with grandstanding.

Whatever the motivations, Fulop has created a citywide debate that is long overdue. The administration of Jerramiah Healy came to power with a "get tough on crime" platform. Healy touts his many police hirings while explaining that the Police Department is still very undermanned.

What many residents want to know is where are these police officers. It is obvious that the days of the nightstick-swinging officer "walking" the beat in neighborhoods and knowing everyone by their first names are long gone. Yet, residents still long for a return to the "visible" officer.

Today, police travel in two-man patrol cars. The frustration comes from the belief that the police are a reaction rather than a prevention force.

Residents also are wary of an administration that has promoted a great number of officers. It leads to the question of how many supervisors there are for an "X" number of police officers. Each administration seems to give a variety of answers to that question.

No one ever questions the bravery and dedication of police. Most only want police superiors to make the best use of the manpower available.

There is crime in the streets. This city had 39 murders last year - 21 by gunfire. Remember, every shot fired is a potential fatality. Even the lesser quality-of-life crimes seem to be getting out of hand. We look to our elected leaders and police as the last line of defense against chaos, perceived or not.

Now is not the time for officials to circle the wagons. It is time for them to show us that law enforcement is working. It is a time to listen to concerns of residents. Attending evening sessions with neighborhood groups for question and answer sessions is an ongoing effort, but there has to be a way to reach more residents with information about how they can protect themselves. If need be, it is time to hold people accountable.

Police and residents should not be adversaries. They should be partners in trying to make the city a safer place to live.

**A NEW Newark Avenue? Redevelopment plan considered;
neighbors want more info**

November 20, 2006

Ricardo Kaulessar

Jersey City Reporter

There are plans to put the NEW into a section of Newark Avenue.

The City Council at its meeting on Nov. 7 passed a resolution for a swath between Newark Avenue and Christopher Columbus Drive from Grove Street to Jersey Avenue to be studied for redevelopment or rehabilitation by the Jersey City Planning Board.

Someday, the streetscape could include bike racks, trees, historic lighting, new businesses and apartments, and improved cross-walks.

The resolution was introduced by Councilman Steven Fulop, who represents the area to be studied.

Fulop said he put forward the resolution after meeting recently with business owners and representatives of the Historic Downtown Special Improvement District to discuss upgrading the streetscape on Newark Avenue and bringing in new businesses.

By law, an area designated for redevelopment can have its zoning changed, and the city can use the power of eminent domain to transform the area.

Presently, the section of the street in question includes a McDonald's, a pizzeria, pet and hardware stores, and a small city park.

Fulop said last week that he expects to see the Planning Department present the findings of their investigation sometime between January and March.

"In my mind, it is a very positive thing to pursue improving this side of Newark Avenue," said Fulop.

What is the plan?

Fulop wants zoning changed for the area (which is zoned Neighborhood Commercial) to see the large retail spaces on Newark Avenue be split into two spaces to allow for more businesses on Christopher Columbus Drive, and bring more life to an area that is currently dominated by a mural painting.

"The spaces on Newark Avenue are too large for one retail store, and I would like to help create a streetscape where the mural is currently located," said Fulop. "We need visible storefronts on Christopher Columbus Drive, as it is not an inviting atmosphere for people seeing the gates down."

Thus, the idea of pushing for a study of "an area in need of rehabilitation."

Fulop said he has in mind a "streetscape and conceptual plan," something that is also described on his website (www.stevenfulop.com). The streetscape element would include bike racks, trees, historic lighting, and improved cross-walks, to promote a more pedestrian friendly area to shop and sightsee.

Also, the streetscape plan includes elements are LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified to be environmentally friendly and allowing grants to be pursued.

Fulop said his plan came out of looking at what already exists in the area. There is a streetscape on the north side of Newark Avenue spanning from the intersection at Christopher Columbus Drive to Barrow Street. The streetscape includes several buildings with a brickface façade and a street-based clock stationed at the corner of Barrow and Newark.

He also has looked at the new businesses and new developments that have opened on Newark Avenue. He cites the examples of the It's Greek To Me restaurant on the northwest corner of Jersey and Newark avenues, and the construction of the Grove Pointe, a 29-story building on Columbus Drive near Newark Avenue that will consist of 67 condominiums and 458 rental apartments. The developers are revamping a one-block section of Newark Avenue and the triangular park area at the entrance to the Grove Street PATH station.

Fulop's plan for revitalizing Newark Avenue is another of a number of initiatives that he has pursued since coming into office last year, such as a "Restaurant Row" ordinance that has extended hours for alcohol to be served at restaurants and other establishments.

"I think we're pushing the process," said Fulop. "By the end of my first term in 2009, I want to see a thoroughfare filled with restaurants."

But what does the public think?

When the resolution sponsored by Fulop was passed at the previous meeting, there was no public speaking since it is not permitted during the approval of resolutions.

But some in the public weighed in on Fulop's plans last week.

Dan Levin, a Third Street resident who lives only blocks from the Newark Avenue area, said he only learned about Fulop's proposal by reading about it in the Nov. 12 Jersey City Reporter. He has hoped that Fulop would have spoken to residents before any resolution was passed.

"A powerful redevelopment plan can take property through eminent domain, as business owners have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars," said Levin. "You don't need a redevelopment plan to do streetscape improvement."

Fulop said he did not intentionally avoid informing the public, and noted that he deals with 13 neighborhood associations. After the interview, Fulop posted information on his website including renderings of how Jersey Avenue and Newark Avenue could look if the area undergoes the transformation.

Fulop also presented his ideas to the Harsimus Cove Neighborhood Association Wednesday night.

Valerio Luccio, the outgoing president of the association, said he was on board with Fulop's proposal.

"My understanding is what Steve is doing is an ongoing process and he was doing a little bit of both upgrades and changing the zoning to really promote Columbus Drive and Newark Avenue," said Luccio. "We need more forceful action besides aesthetics."

Luccio also said there has been talk about doing streetscape upgrades for years, but Fulop's plan is first in a long time that is close to reality.

Business owners in the area said they welcome any upgrade project.

Steve Kalcanides, owner of longtime Newark Avenue business Helen's Pizza, said last week Fulop has spoken to him about upgrade ideas.

"There has been a couple of years passed since the city did a facade program on the north side of the Newark Avenue, but grant money ran out to do any work on the south side," said Kalcanides. "I look forward to seeing it happen. Steve Fulop is really taking bull by the horns."

Wilson Kim, owner of Nature's House at 159 Newark Ave. for 10 years, said he likes Fulop's ideas and hopes to see other initiatives.

"I hope they can create parking on a slant, because a lot of customers don't shop on Newark Avenue because there's not enough parking," said Kim.

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Hudson County's culture of corruption: Its local roots and prospects for change

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By Mark J. Bonamo

Hudson Reporter

On the Hudson County waterfront, a man who doesn't want you to know his name sits in the back room of a bar. His glittering blue eyes dance as he sits back and tells stories about a lifetime of watching and waging war in Hudson County politics. As the stories of various campaigns and convictions over the last 30 years roll off his silver tongue, the longtime county employee stops for a moment and laughs.

"Definitely nine out of ten commandments were broken," he says with a crooked smile on his face. "What I can say is I seen all types of illegal action committed, outside of murder. I saw the envelopes come in. They took the cash in and they shared it. Not that good, but they did. The people that the public expects the least are usually the ones who do the most. It's just the nature of the beast."

He was, and is, corrupt. But he is a free man. And he is among friends.

According to the office of Christopher Christie, U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, Hudson County politicians have made significant contributions to New Jersey's culture of political corruption. There have been recent indictments involving political corruption in Essex, Middlesex and Monmouth counties. However, out of nearly 100 New Jersey political corruption cases where the defendants have either pleaded guilty or have been convicted of politically related charges since 2002, 20 originated in Hudson County, over 20 percent of the total cases.

In the last five years, the following local politicians, from the petty to the powerful, are just a few of those that have been snagged:

- Anthony Russo, a former Hoboken mayor who admitted accepting thousands of dollars in bribes from a Hoboken-base accounting firm (see sidebar).
- Robert Janiszewski, the Hudson County Executive from 1998 to 2001, who now sits in a Kentucky federal prison for extortion and tax evasion.
- Patrick Cecala, a former secretary to Hoboken's Alcohol Beverage Control Board and former school board member who had no prior criminal record, asked a woman for a \$1,000 bribe to smooth the process of getting a liquor license in Hudson County's most bar-packed town. He later said, "One thousand dollars was just a round number. I just could have used \$1,000 cash in my pocket."
- Peter Perez, a former North Bergen parks and recreation commissioner, pleaded guilty to accepting kickbacks from an air conditioning contractor who had town contacts. The contractor also did work on officials' private homes.

If political corruption makes New Jersey a national joke, then Hudson County is the punch line. For nearly a century, the 62 square miles hard on the west bank of the Hudson have been looked upon as the spot where the cancer that is eating the Garden State body politic alive was first metastasized.

What ultimately fuels the fire of Hudson County political corruption, which is as livid and long lasting as a burning oil slick? Does Hudson County still deserve its besmirched reputation? Is there really a culture of corruption here that knows no

rival? If so, what does that culture do to the people who live here? Can Hudson County change? Does it need to?

Corruption in any form may create more questions than answers. Whether political corruption in Hudson County is only waterfront whispers, or a sticking point in a statewide Senate election, the answers are needed now more than ever.

Frank Hague's ghost

There is one man in the history of Hudson County corruption who cannot be ignored.

Frank Hague was the mayor of Jersey City from 1917 to 1947. Born in 1876 to Irish immigrant parents, he grew up tough in "the Horseshoe," a long-gone tenement neighborhood near what became the entrance to the Holland Tunnel.

Expelled from school as an incorrigible 13-year-old, Hague's natural political skills vaulted him through the ranks of the Hudson County Democratic Party.

He was elected commissioner of public safety for Jersey City in 1916 as a reformer and used his position as head of the police and fire departments to build the rock-solid base and patronage system that would extend and consolidate his power in Jersey City.

While he cleaned up the police force and lowered the crime rate, he recruited a group of plainclothes policemen from the Horseshoe to be his "Zeppelins," an elite secret surveillance squad within the police force who had a fierce loyalty to him. Riding a tide of simmering Catholic anger at the previous Protestant control of the city, plus the need for safer streets, Hague was unanimously elected mayor by the city commission government within a year.

The vaunted machine Hague built to maintain his control honed the now familiar political methods of canvassing, telephoning potential voters and transporting voters to the polls, establishing the famed Hudson County Democratic "get out the vote" apparatus that is still revered and feared in New Jersey politics. Between 1916 and 1940, Democrats won six of nine gubernatorial elections, most due to huge Hudson County electoral landslides. Federal funds from allies such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt flowed into Jersey City. Through his ward leaders, Hague created a unique form of municipal socialism that provided needed services for his constituents at the height of the Depression. When Hague said "I am the law" in Jersey City, he meant it.

Corruption continues

Hague's Hudson County empire did not last forever. Returning World War II veterans increasingly felt locked out by the machine. Other ethnic groups outside Hague's Irish power base began to feel neglected. Hague's strong-arm tactics and long vacations in places like Florida and Paris alienated many working-class residents.

As a result, Hague's appointed successor, his nephew, would lose to a reform slate led by John V. Kenny in 1949. Hague died a millionaire in his Manhattan apartment in 1956, unable to return alive to his former seat of power for fear of being subpoenaed over the kickback schemes that had made him rich.

Hague's mayoralty has been described by local author and historian Thomas Fleming as a "blend of violence and benevolence." Law and order was maintained by "justice at the end of a nightstick," a slogan Hague liked to use and occasionally enforce himself.

Although electoral fraud, enhanced by a misused state voter registration law, was part of the skewed equation that led to Hague's success, it was not the only reason why, unlike other American political bosses of his time, he continually faced the electorate and won.

Despite his rough reputation and use of voter fraud, Hague was never indicted and never spent a day in jail. Served with a subpoena in a \$3 million kickback suit brought by city employees in an attempt to recover funds, Hague never paid back a dime. Although his Jersey City mayoral salary never exceeded \$8,000 a year and he had no other source of legitimate income, at the time of his death, his wealth was estimated to have been over \$10 million. For Hague, politics had paid well.

Hague was dead, but the boilerplate he set up for Hudson County politicians to follow was alive and well. Kenny set up his own satrapy in Hudson County, and the former reformer grew wealthy from his own patronage system and his kickback cash cow.

Mayor of Jersey City until 1953, Kenny remained the power behind the throne in Hudson County until 1971, when he and Mayor Thomas Whelan were indicted and convicted as members of the "Hudson County Eight" for conspiracy and extortion for taking \$3.5 million in kickbacks in exchange for county construction contracts. When Robert Janiszewski became Hudson County Executive in 1988, it was hoped that he was the true reformer Hudson County had been waiting for.

But "Bobby J" was destined to disappoint. Janiszewski abruptly resigned from office in 2001, and it was subsequently revealed that he had secretly worked as an informer for the federal government since late 2000. His testimony brought down other Hudson County officials including Nidia Davila-Colon, a five-term Hudson County freeholder, who received a two-and-a-half-year term for passing more than \$10,000 in bribes to Janiszewski to ensure that her then-boyfriend, Dr. Oscar Sandoval, would receive millions of dollars in county contracts. Janiszewski took the stand against her at her trial. Sandoval became an FBI informant and was never charged.

Janiszewski ultimately paid a price himself. He pleaded guilty in 2002 to extortion and tax evasion, admitting he had accepted over \$100,000 in bribes. He was sentenced in 2005 to 41 months in federal prison, where he is currently serving time.

Proven guilty? Says who?

While many Hudson County officials who have been caught on the wrong side of the law remain mum, Gerald McCann, better known as Gerry, is more than willing to talk. A decade before Janiszewski experienced his legal woes, McCann, the mayor of Jersey City from 1981 to 1985 and again from 1989 to 1992, faced his own day in court with similar results.

McCann was found guilty of criminal fraud and tax evasion, although for offenses that took place when he was not in office. After his fall, Janiszewski expressed

remorse for his actions. In contrast, the notion of McCann as a penitent politician is belied by the way he expresses himself.

"Do you really think people go into public service to serve the public?" he said. "There are hundreds of other ways to do it. Why do people like Jon Corzine want to become governor and Tom Kean Jr. want to become U.S. senator? It's the power. That's what they really want. It's the only thing that they didn't have. They had money, but they didn't have power. Sometimes when power becomes almost absolute, then the potential for corruption occurs."

But what about those who keep their noses clean, and then somehow get embroiled anyway - not all are a Hague looking to feather their bed. Aside from the Janiszewskis of the state, the corruption count also includes politicians who used campaign funds for jobs for relatives, accepted sporting-event tickets for political favors, and so on.

McCann said that, for many, the rise to power becomes a slippery slope.

"A councilman in a small town is not necessarily looking for power," he conceded. "But there are people who believe that the problems that occur in a small town can be resolved if they themselves get elected. Once these people become decision makers, the people who want to become the beneficiaries of their new power start to get them to cross over, whether it's paying bribes or getting kickbacks. Campaign contributions are part of the same thing. No one can get anybody to volunteer anymore because they think everybody is corrupt. It becomes self-perpetuating. In order to move up the chain in politics, you have to live in the gray. There are a lot of people more than willing to live in the gray. Gray is very close to black."

McCann drew a fine line between black and white until he finally left a distinct smudge. He was convicted in December 1991 of defrauding a South Florida bank by diverting for personal gain at least \$267,000 of a \$300,000 investment the bank entrusted to him in 1986 and 1987 to develop a marina at Liberty State Park in Jersey City. He was sentenced to 33 months in federal prison and ultimately served 24 months. When asked if he felt he did anything wrong, his answer was Jersey City blunt.

"I absolutely do not believe anything that I did was illegal," he said. "The power of the prosecutor's office got me. I didn't do anything corrupt. Corruption is when you are in a public position, and you do something to violate that trust. I was convicted for things that occurred when I wasn't the mayor. I'm very proud of what I achieved as mayor. I can show you the development at Newport, Harsimus Cove, Exchange Place, Grove Street, the light rail, and the new homes where Roosevelt Stadium was. If you have a legacy, it's what you've achieved in your own life. You can't point to one person, including Frank Hague, who did more."

Off the back of a truck

Not everyone agrees with McCann's assessment.

"Dream on, Gerry," said Jersey City native and published author Helene Stapinski. "Those buildings on the waterfront would have been built sooner and better without him."

Stapinski was born in Jersey City Medical Center, the hospital that Frank Hague built. A former journalist and an author, her critically acclaimed book *Five-Finger Discount* documents growing up in a Jersey City where personal and political corruption were often intertwined. Her appraisal of McCann's self-appraisal is not very forgiving.

Stapinski's frustration with McCann and the rest of Hudson County's ruling political class comes from both early observation and subtle cooperation. A key concept embedded in Stapinski's consciousness from an early age was "swag": stolen without a gun.

"Swag was a socially acceptable way of taking what wasn't yours, mostly stuff to live on," she said. "Your socks and underwear just fell off the back of a truck."

Stapinski went on in detail about how her father brought home frozen seafood not normally seen in working-class Jersey City homes from his job at Union Terminal Cold Storage.

"There were a lot of lobster tails on my table growing up," she said. "The thievery among the common folk happened because it trickled down from above," she said, "and it was OK to do stuff like that. When you were bringing Ivory Soap home from the job, that's peanuts to what Hague was doing. It paled in comparison so much, that it's not really illegal."

Stapinski didn't always think that politicians affected people's personal lives.

"I used to think that they were unimportant and that I didn't have to vote," the current Brooklyn resident said. "But the older you get, the more you see. Politicians are making the laws, and they are breaking the laws. They are defining what happens on a large scale and for the long-term future. If the schools are poorly run because of corrupt politics, the Yuppies will leave. This makes me really want to vote three times, which you can do in Hudson County sometimes."

Stapinski wondered aloud if voters will actually pull the lever for any Hudson County politician running for statewide office.

"Hudson County was such a power magnet in statewide politics, but that time is all gone," she said. "It's more of an albatross now. Even the whiff of Hudson County makes people itchy."

In the shadows

The man in the back room of the bar on the waterfront is just the type of Hudson County resident who makes people reach for the calamine lotion. His desire for anonymity is based on a certain practicality.

"I would not like to expose my family to this," said Mr. C (not his real initial). "You never get complimented on something like this. There is always something that backfires. I'm almost done and will leave this life with my pension."

The man's description of the life he lived and witnessed is murky at best.

"You could say I was more involved in south Hudson, but helped others in north Hudson," he says. "I was mainly a county person, so Bobby Janiszewski was whom I

supported the most. Basically, we all get recycled." Around Bobby J, the man saw the same cycle over and over, as the deals were made in various shades of green. "Corruption might be dressed differently, but it is mainly the same," Mr. C said. "Kickbacks are always in cash, unless the other people are dumb and make some kind of gift that is tangible. Major law firms always get the big contracts. Bond deals are always made through friends that work for the bond houses that underwrite the deals. Unnecessary jobs go to workers who support the campaigns. If you were to actually hold interviews for some major jobs within the local municipal and county governments, three-fourths of the individuals would never get the job."

When asked what motivates Hudson County politicians and those around them to step outside the law, Mr. C cited two primary reasons.

"Both money and power," he said. "As the money comes in, most politicians start to need the control, and control brings power. They need the control because you can't trust anyone else, because they might slip up. They start to become paranoid because they start to worry about getting caught. Let's not fool ourselves. This is not a good boys club or girls club."

The local politico believes that people are fooling themselves if they truly think legislative measures to stem corruption would be any more than a futile finger in a dike.

"If a law is made, it is made mostly by lawyers," Mr. C said. "They are the same people who find ways around the law, and they are prevalent in politics. Pay-to-play laws are to appease the public, but that will never change who gets contracts and whose friend gets a job."

Christie's anti-corruption campaign

Christopher Christie was appointed U.S. Attorney for New Jersey by President George W. Bush in December 2001. Since then, Christie has taken an aggressive approach against political corruption in the Garden State. This strong stance has resulted in 97 successful prosecutions of both elected officials and other participants in illegal activities, such as contractors, who are part of the circle of corruption.

Christie has received bipartisan accolades for his work, in part because notable political figures of both the red and blue persuasion have had purple bruises administered by his office.

Former Republican Essex County Executive James Treffinger was brought up on corruption charges in 2002 when Treffinger was a leading G.O.P. contender for the U.S. Senate. It was Christie and his office who got former Democratic Hudson County Executive Janiszewski to plead guilty in 2002.

Recently, Christie was the driving force behind the legal effort that led former Democratic State Senate President John Lynch to plead guilty to charges of mail fraud and tax evasion. At a Sept. 15 press conference following Lynch's plea, Christie spoke about the ongoing struggle against corruption in New Jersey.

"At this point this is an old story," he said. "This office will continue to be vigilant about going after anyone who violates the law and betrays the public trust. Absolutely no one in New Jersey is above the law."

The advocate

Donald Scarinci knows the law.

In the early 1970s, the local, politically connected attorney was editor of the school newspaper at Union Hill High School around the time U.S. Senator and senatorial candidate Robert Menendez was student body president. The two men formed a friendship that lasted while both served as aides to Union City Mayor and State Senator William Musto. Musto's political career would come to a close in 1982 after his federal conviction on racketeering charges.

The ties between Scarinci and Menendez are not just political, but personal. Musto's conviction was due in part to his former protégé Menendez's testimony. Menendez went on to build a political career that took him to Musto's mayoral chair, the state assembly, the state senate, the U.S. House of Representatives and finally, after his appointment in January by Governor Jon Corzine, to the U.S. Senate.

Meanwhile, in an August interview, Scarinci would parallel his longtime ally's rise in his own field. His law practice is now one of the most influential in the state.

"I've been involved in Hudson County politics and government since 1972," he said. "Right off the cuff I would tell you that it is mythology that Hudson County is more corrupt than anywhere else. It has nothing to do with anything that has happened since the days of Frank Hague. The reality is that there are fewer instances of public corruption in Hudson County than in 50 percent of the other counties in the state of New Jersey. Bad people will do bad things."

He added, "Just because there are a few bad people like Gerry McCann and Bob Janiszewski doesn't mean all public officials are bad. You haven't had people stealing public money in Hudson County since the Musto trial in 1982. Wall Street would not be developing the waterfront if they had the concept that Hudson County was a corrupt place. I think the perception is based on folklore."

According to Scarinci, the perception of a hopelessly corrupt Hudson County is based in something even darker than local legend.

"The idea has its foundation more in racism and prejudice than in any reality," he said. "Hudson County to some people becomes a euphemism for Latinos, in the same way that Essex County becomes a euphemism for African-Americans. When people want to suggest that the people from Hudson County are above-average corrupt, I think that there is a very large element of bigotry and racism in that kind of remark."

Scarinci defended his friend Menendez as a true reformer.

"He demonstrated by his actions that he is a reformer. He testified against his mentor Musto, who was a personal and a political disappointment to him. Several people who were indicted with Musto were members of organized crime. Bob Menendez testified against them. That took courage. I saw him wear the bullet-proof vest," Scarinci said, referring to protective clothing worn by Menendez in the period surrounding Musto's trial.

Corruption issue affects Senate race

The question of ethics has recently become a major campaign issue for the Nov. 7 midterm elections. While Menendez's side has tried to portray him as someone who would stand up to President Bush and try to reverse perceived policy failures regarding Iraq and the war on terror, his Republican challenger, Tom Kean Jr., has tried to hit Menendez close to home. Ethics has been a major theme of Kean's drive to unseat Menendez, depicting him as just another corrupt Hudson County politician.

Menendez has had to fend off several corruption allegations in recent weeks. These criticisms have included that while in the House of Representatives, Menendez leased a building he owned to a Union City nonprofit agency for which he helped win federal funds.

Cutting even closer to the bone, Menendez was forced to sever ties with a close advisor, fundraiser and friend, the aforementioned Scarinci, after a 1999 telephone conversation was released in which Scarinci was recorded using Menendez's name to gain political leverage.

Menendez, who is known for never backing down from a political fight, has tried to give as good as he gets. The Menendez campaign threw ethics accusations right back at the Kean campaign when it was revealed that a researcher working for Kean's chief campaign consultant was digging for dirt on Menendez through an exchange of letters with the infamous Bobby Janiszewski. The former Hudson County executive writes his letters from the confines of a federal prison cell in Kentucky.

Corruption countercharges will continue to add enmity to this no-holds-barred political street fight that could have national implications. (Read next week's article about how the issue of corruption has helped frame the Menendez vs. Kean campaign.)

A policy perspective

Ross Baker, a professor of political science at Rutgers University and a longtime observer of the New Jersey political scene, said there are cultural and structural reasons for the county's corruption, and those have to change.

"Hudson County deserves every bit of its reputation," he said. "One of the things about Menendez, particularly after he turned state's evidence against Billy Musto, was that he stood out as the glowing exception, proof that a reformer could come out of Hudson County. But then again, Frank Hague and Bobby Janiszewski originally were reformers too. It's too bad in a way that the low state of public rectitude in Hudson County tends to rub off on people who try to escape its clutches."

Baker said the problem starts with having too many politicians. He cites county executives, positions that not all counties have.

"The center [of power] is never as powerful as the collective might of the twenty-one county chairs," he said. "Office double dipping has to be abolished. It tends to monopolize elective offices. It's a dangerous concentration of power. Pay-to-play legislation also has to be passed."

But Baker worried that some of it is ingrained.

"There are also cultural factors that will only change over the long run," he said. "A lot of the politics of Hudson County is tribal in that political ties are intermingled with ethnic ties. The more Hudson County becomes a desirable place for upper-middle-class people to live, the more that leads to the demographic transformation of Hudson County. The waterfront communities offer probably the best hope for reform."

Councilman reflects on potential change

But will it work?

Steven Fulop was raised in Edison. The 29-year-old Jersey City resident came to live on the waterfront for the same reason many other new Hudson County residents did.

"I was working at Goldman Sachs," he said. "Goldman was moving their building to Jersey City. You get a lot of the benefits of being close to Manhattan, but at the same time all the benefits of being in Jersey. It just kind of made sense."

What Fulop did after he made the move to Jersey City was more unusual. He enlisted in the Marines after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and temporarily left Wall Street in 2003 to serve a tour with Marines in Iraq. Shortly after his return, he entered politics. Fulop stunned many local political observers by winning the downtown Jersey City council seat in 2005 over the Hudson County Democratic Organization (HCDO) incumbent.

When looking at the question of pay-to-play reform, Fulop offered some cautionary comments.

"If the reforms are not done in a way that would affect the county organizations as well, you will inadvertently adversely affect the reform candidates, because you won't give them the same access to funds the other side is going to have times ten," he said. "Jersey City adopted the state's pay-to-play reform package. Now some groups have come forward and said that they want a kind of pay-to-play law that would restrict developers from giving money to any Jersey City candidates. The premise is good, but if you do that, you restrict the money that somebody can get independently, but you can't restrict a developer from giving the money to the HCDO, which will ultimately give to the candidates that they choose."

Fulop continued, "Reform should go further to include not only banning dual public-office holding, but also holding two jobs that are paid for by taxpayer dollars in any capacity. Here in Hudson County, we are one of the biggest violators of this. Taxpayers paying one salary should be enough."

A number of Hudson County politicians have picked up the banner of reform before, only to wind up covered in sludge. Fulop thinks that he knows a way to avoid this fate.

"What I'd like to do is have an impact in the near term, and then I think that I'm done," he said. "You go back to the private sector, say that you served the public, and that's it. When you stay in office for too long, that's when things start to go awry."

He said that some people duck politics because of its reputation, causing a vicious cycle.

"You can't say everybody is corrupt and evil here," he said, "because that's surely not the case. We're headed in the right direction. In Hoboken, we have some young council people with fresh ideas coming from the private sector. In Jersey City, we're moving that way. You need the residents to put the right people in elected office, and then you need those elected officials to do the responsible thing. Part of the problem is that we still have the mentality that if you're good at hanging campaign signs, then you might qualify for some senior-level position, which is ridiculous. We're long past that mentality. So you either recognize that and get involved with change and progress, or you're going to have to get out of the way. Change can be forced, or change can be embraced. Either way, we'll take it."

Fulop donating council salary to school that helps women

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By KEN THORBOURNE

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Downtown Jersey City Councilman Steve Fulop talks a lot about giving back to the community, and now he's putting his money where his mouth is.

The freshman councilman announced yesterday that he's donating his roughly \$23,000 City Council annual salary to the Kenmare High School, an alternative high school that gives women a chance to earn a high school diploma.

The Kenmare High School is one of several programs run by the York Street Project, a nonprofit operated by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace to help women who've fallen on hard times.

"My goal is to do this every year," said Fulop, a CitiGroup employee. "One of the goals is to bring awareness to the great things they do."

Sister Joan Repka, the high school's principal, was ecstatic.

"We are grateful that Councilman Fulop has chosen to make a difference in the lives of our women," Repka said. "His generosity will enable us to continue offer the counseling and job and life skills training our women need."

Fulop credits his aide, Tracy LaBad, with introducing him to the work of the York Street Project.

Three years ago, LaBad fell into bankruptcy when she had to undergo medical treatment without medical insurance.

A year ago, LaBad went to live at St. Mary's Residence, a housing development run by York Street Project for single women.

"There's a reason you're at a point in your life and I am grateful to have a place like St. Mary's that is safe, affordable, clean and has good food," she said. "And living a block from the waterfront isn't bad."

