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In New York Suburbs, Campaigns Are Anything but Genteel

By LISA W. FODERARO NOV. 2, 2017

In Nassau County, a mailer paid for by state Republicans said the Democratic candidate for county executive, Laura Curran, would “roll out the welcome mat” for the violent gang MS-13.

The Republican candidate for county executive, Jack Martins, said he stands by the ad.

As Election Day approaches, a handful of races in the New York suburbs are devolving into freewheeling fights marked by scorched-earth television ads, alarmist mailings and reams of outside money.

In Westchester County, the final days of the campaign for county executive are centering not on education, crime and services, but on a Rolex watch, unpaid parking tickets and so-called dark money from a Trump-friendly PAC.

Indeed, the campaign of the incumbent county executive, Rob Astorino, a Republican, has benefited from a recent infusion of \$1 million from the conservative hedge fund billionaires Robert and Rebekah Mercer. His television ads have far outnumbered those of his opponent, George Latimer, a Democratic state senator, accusing Mr. Latimer of not paying his property taxes.

In turn, Mr. Latimer has fought back with his own ads. In a county where 65 percent of voters rejected President Trump last November, Mr. Latimer is asserting that Mr. Astorino is playing by the Trump playbook, showing video clips of the two men smiling together at an event.

But perhaps the most stunning piece of political literature showed up in Edison, N.J., a multiethnic township in Middlesex County.

An anonymous mailer that proclaimed, “Make Edison Great Again,” borrowing a phrase from Mr. Trump’s campaign, showed the photographs of two candidates for Edison’s board of education, Falguni Patel and Jerry Shi, with the words “Deport” underneath.

“The Chinese and Indians are taking over our town,” the mailing read. “Chinese school! Indian school! Cricket fields! Enough is enough!”

The mailer was denounced by Edison’s mayor, Thomas Lankey, a Democrat who called it “vile” and “racist.” He has referred the postcards to the police and prosecutors. Under state election law, it is illegal to circulate ads that do not reveal who paid for them.

The controversial mailer in Nassau County features a photo of three bare-chested Latino men covered with tattoos, and proclaims, “Meet Your New Neighbors!” It says that Ms. Curran, a county legislator, is “MS-13’s choice for county executive.”

Mr. Martins defended the mailing, saying that Ms. Curran has allied herself with nonprofit groups that support sanctuary cities. “We’re not going to sacrifice public safety on the altar of political correctness,” he said on Thursday.

Ms. Curran, who has said numerous times that she does not support so-called sanctuary cities or counties, said she was stunned by the pamphlet. “It just seems like a very desperate, last-ditch effort at fear-mongering,” she said. “There’s been a real backlash.”

Political observers say one reason the current races, particularly for county executive, have become so ugly is the sense that any contest will be perceived as a referendum on the presidency of Mr. Trump.

Hank Sheinkopf, a longtime New York political consultant, said that is especially true in Westchester, where Democrats outnumber Republicans two-to-one. (In Nassau, Democrats have a slight edge over Republicans.)

“An Astorino victory means a possible 2018 Republican candidate lives another day to take on Cuomo,” said Mr. Sheinkopf, alluding to Mr. Astorino’s failed bid against Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo in 2014. “It also would mean a tremendous failure of the so-called progressives who thought winning in Westchester would be a walk in the park.”

Perhaps no race in the New York region has as many negative elements as the one for county executive in Westchester. Mr. Astorino, who is seeking a third term, began running advertisements early, hammering Mr. Latimer for raising taxes while a county legislator in White Plains and then a state senator in Albany. (Mr. Latimer’s campaign countered that Mr. Latimer “voted in Albany to give working New Yorkers the largest tax break in generations.”)

More recently, the focus has turned to a complicated tax situation involving Mr. Latimer’s wife, who is in a dispute with a relative over a house in Rye. Records show more than \$40,000 in unpaid property taxes on the house. A new television ad features an older woman addressing Mr. Latimer. “Hey George,” she says. “Just pay your darn taxes.”

Mr. Latimer said the issue of the unpaid taxes was a distraction. “We are focusing on trivial issues — issues that have a sensational element — instead of the substantive issues of government,” he said at a recent news conference.

Then there is the issue of Mr. Latimer’s parking tickets, which until recently had topped \$2,000 and have led to the loss of his car registration. William F. B. O’Reilly, a spokesman for Mr. Astorino’s campaign, said the unpaid property taxes and parking tickets were both “public policy issues and an Albany politician expression of arrogance.”

Another flash point in the campaign is the money from the Mercers, prominent financial supporters of conservative causes and patrons of the former White House adviser Stephen K. Bannon. Mr. O'Reilly called the funding an "independent expenditure" that is "beyond our control."

But Mr. Latimer denounced the spending, saying that "in Westchester, we don't expect our politics to be driven by extreme ideology, with an unprecedented amount donated from an alt-right billionaire." The state's Democratic Committee unveiled its own counterpunch: "Fighting ultraconservatives in Washington is hard enough," the ad says, "so don't let Donald Trump bring his right-wing White House to Westchester."

No political fight in Westchester, one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, would be complete without a Rolex. During the federal corruption trial of Norman Seabrook, the former president of New York City's correction officers' union, a witness testified that he had helped Mr. Astorino pay for a Rolex watch valued between \$7,000 and \$10,000.

The Latimer campaign was quick to capitalize on the testimony, running an ad that talks darkly of "cash, bribes, even a \$10,000 watch from a convicted felon."

Mr. Astorino disputed the testimony, producing a receipt for the watch, which he said cost less than \$2,000. "County Executive Astorino was inappropriately offered a new gold Rolex watch at a jewelry store in 2013 from a donor he didn't know well," Mr. O'Reilly said in a statement. "He immediately refused the gift, instead purchasing a secondhand steel watch with his own money."

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