

Newcomer ousts Senate president Montalbano

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PROVIDENCE — Senate President Joseph A. Montalbano, a powerhouse in state politics for much of the last two decades, appears to have been defeated by a retired business executive who has never held elective office.

On the same day that voters across the nation clamored for change, voters in Rhode Island's Senate District 17 changed the face of the legislature's Democratic leadership, ousting one of the three most powerful men in the State House.

Edward O'Neill, an independent who lost a bid for Lincoln town administrator in 2006, will represent residents of Lincoln, Pawtucket and North Providence when the General Assembly reconvenes in January. He defeated Montalbano 54.3 percent to 45.7 percent, with 16 of 17 precincts reporting to the Board of Elections last night.

Montalbano conceded last night from Blooperz Bar and Grill, a North Providence eatery where he had gathered with hundreds of supporters, who were stunned by the upset

"It's bittersweet. I've been in the Senate 20 years and it's been an honor," Montalbano said. "I also think this year there's been a message of change out there that has resonated with the people. You saw that on the national level and now you're also seeing it on the local level. And the fact is the responsibility falls to the General Assembly."

The powerful chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Steven Alves, of West Warwick, was also ousted from Smith Hill, after losing a contested primary battle in September.

Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Paiva Weed, meanwhile, cruised to victory against Donna Perry, a former executive director of the state Republican Party.

O'Neill had run an aggressive race, loaning his campaign \$30,000 to launch a media campaign attacking Montalbano's ethics and integrity. "I do not owe favors to other members of the legislature, nor do I have the conflicts of interest associated with large contributions from political action committees. As your state senator, I will make you proud, not ashamed," O'Neill declared in a campaign pamphlet titled "Ethics and integrity or 'business as usual.'"

O'Neill, 62, also enjoyed the unofficial backing of Governor Carcieri and was a regular call-in guest on local talk radio stations. He spent last night in his Lincoln home with

about 30 supporters. He said he wasn't surprised by the victory, noting he had dedicated hundreds of hours to campaigning.

"I think voters, particularly in this district, they had a burning desire for a change," O'Neill said as he waited for the Board of Elections to confirm his numbers that showed him up by more than 900 votes at about 10 p.m. The results did not include about 550 mail ballots.

But it was more than a call for change, O'Neill said.

Montalbano had high-profile scrapes with the state Ethics Commission, and he was also hurt by local political conflicts.

He was fined \$12,000 last year — the third-highest fine in commission history — for failing to disclose legal work for the Town of West Warwick on property related to the Harrah's-Narragansett Indian casino plan. He also failed to file statements disclosing that his official actions in the Senate might pose a conflict of interest.

And locally, Montalbano helped broker a deal that extended hours at Twin River, although voters in Lincoln had clearly signaled they did support the move. He also supported the new Blackstone Valley courthouse initially proposed for Lincoln, despite local opposition.

The Senate majority leader under former Senate President William V. Irons, Montalbano moved up to the presidency after Irons' abrupt New Year's Eve resignation in December 2003. The Senate president controls the flow of legislation in the chamber and represents the Senate in negotiations with the House leadership and the governor.

Montalbano is a real-estate lawyer, and has specialized in condominium law; he has done legal work for many Rhode Island communities in such areas as estate tax sales and zoning. But his private-business dealings led to his run-in with the state Ethics Commission.

Montalbano was also hurt by a recent redistricting.

Lincoln makes up the largest block of Senate District 17, nearly 44 percent of its registered voters. Montalbano, 53, a Pawtucket native who now lives in North Providence, is the first to admit he's not as popular in Lincoln as he is in the district's other two communities, Pawtucket (19 percent of registered voters) and North Providence (38 percent).

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