



Flanked by supporters, Edward O'Neill of Lincoln gives the thumbs up to signal his stunning victory over 20-year incumbent and Rhode Island Senate President Joseph Montalbano in their race for the District 17 Senate seat Tuesday.

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O'Neill Topples Senate President

By PAUL R. DUBOIS, Breeze Staff Writer

LINCOLN - State senators will be looking around for a new president. In a stunning victory, independent candidate Edward O'Neill of Lincoln defeated Joseph Montalbano, the 20-year senator and Senate president, collecting 54 percent of the vote, and posting a 6,185-5,212 victory for the District 17 seat.

Click here for Lincoln returns:

www.valleybreeze.com/www/LINC_Elect_Chart_11-2008.pdf

Flagged by an effervescent retired businessman in O'Neill, who displayed energy that belies his 62 years, Montalbano met a candidate

who campaigned relentlessly in all three communities that make up this district.

"He walked the entire district, and when he was done, he walked the North Providence and Pawtucket portions of the district a second time," said O'Neill's wife, Carole. "We were cautiously optimistic heading into today."

The caution was earned because two years ago, when O'Neill ran in a five-way race for town administrator, polls showed him ahead, but when the counting was completed, T. Joseph Almond emerged victorious.

Tuesday night at North Providence's Bloopers Bar & Grille on Charles Street, a dazed Montalbano told a gathering of supporters, "This wasn't the speech I was anticipating to give."

"But I'm proud of the public service that we have given and hope to return to public service in some capacity in the future."

Tears flowed among many supporters as they watched what had been their politically impenetrable leader concede defeat. For years, the popular Montalbano never had an opponent, and in the last two elections, he easily defeated other candidates from Lincoln.

O'Neill said he decided to seek a General Assembly seat because he was tired of what he called the fiscal irresponsibility and corruption that he says has pervaded state government.

"This state has a culture of corruption that has continued, and it is fiscally out of control," said O'Neill. "I believe that with my business background and experience that I can help to remedy that situation. That's why I chose to run."

The senator-elect swept every Lincoln polling place and while Montalbano won his home North Providence community's polling places and those in Pawtucket, O'Neill dramatically cut into the Senate president's usual margin of victory in those communities.

"We were behind, then ahead all through the night, and finally, when we got the numbers from Central Elementary School in Lincoln, that's when we knew that we had won," said Carole O'Neill. "We thought we would poll well there since it's in Lime Rock, but the way things went back and forth all night, we were holding our breath."

When Central's totals were announced, dozens of O'Neill supporters gathered in his Lladnar Drive home erupted in cheers, knowing their candidate was a winner.

Heading into the campaign, Montalbano promoted his record of accomplishment during his two decades of serving in the Senate, specifically since he became Senate president. He told voters in press releases that they could expect to reap the rewards that come when their hometown senator is in power.

"I have used my position as president of the Senate not only to make the state a better place to live and work, but also to make sure that the needs of the residents of North Providence are not ignored," Montalbano said.

He also pointed to personal efforts that have resulted in the town of Lincoln, which covers a portion of his district, receiving a boost in its share of gaming revenue from Twin River casino when that venue was granted approval to expand weekend operations to a 24-hour per day operation.

O'Neill, running as an independent, said he could not promise voters what he called "insider benefits," but pointed to the state's dismal unemployment rate, poorly performing schools, anti-business climate, high taxes and a budget in crisis, indicating that Montalbano, who has been in the Senate for two decades, was part of the problem.

He stressed during the campaign that Rhode Island governmental leadership must share the blame for the state's high unemployment rate.

Although he ran as an independent, O'Neill, a retired purchasing executive with Texas Instruments, echoed the national Democrat party theme of "the time is right for change," during his campaign.

Montalbano on Tuesday visited several polling places, mainly in Lincoln and Pawtucket, to greet voters as they arrived at the polls. He praised O'Neill for running a hard, but fair campaign, and as he did throughout the campaign, pointed to his own record of accomplishments as the reason voters should return him to office.

But during the past year, Montalbano was caught up in an ethics controversy and was fined \$12,000, something he acknowledged hurt him.

"There's no question that there was a backlash and it played a role," said Montalbano. "But I really think that there was a voter backlash because this was the most high profile contest in the state, and people wanted to make a statement for change. There were no state races, and the congressional races weren't close."

Montalbano said he is willing to accept the edict delivered by voters.

"I've always been willing to accept the will of my constituency," he said. "The message for change that swept the nation seemed to resonate in this district."

He also praised O'Neill for running an upstanding campaign.

"I don't want to take anything away from Mr. O'Neill because he worked very hard," the Senate president said. "Maybe this is good. It's good for the process."

North Providence Mayor Charles Lombardi, who did not campaign for either candidate, said he had "mixed emotions" about Montalbano's defeat.

"I kind of saw it coming," he told The Breeze.
"There was a sense of unhappiness out there. The economy and a lot of things that will be blamed on those who people feel are responsible for it," he said.
Lombardi said he's ready to work with O'Neill and is "confident" the town of North Providence will be represented well in the Senate.



Flanked by his wife Linda and son Steve, Rhode Island Senate President Joseph Montalbano addresses campaign workers and concedes defeat to Lincoln resident Edward O'Neill in a stunning upset Tuesday. Montalbano had won election for 10 consecutive two-year terms in District 17.
