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Montalbano Ousted

By JIM BARON

Lincoln Independent Ed O'Neill pulled off Rhode Island's electoral shocker of the night, toppling powerful Senate President Joseph Montalbano in the District 17 race.

In a race that he made at least partly into a referendum on the General Assembly and its leadership, O'Neill bested Montalbano by a margin of 6,175 to 5,212 according to figures from the state Board of Elections. The district comprises parts of three communities – and Montalbano won in his hometown of North Providence and the Fairlawn section of Pawtucket – but it was O'Neill's nearly 2-1 landslide in Lincoln (3,607 to 1,839) that allowed him to win handily. Lincoln has a larger share of voters in the district than either of the other communities. "People were paying attention," O'Neill said in the midst of a victory party at his Lladnar Drive home. "They were expecting more. I think Joe really lost touch with his constituents. "People were frustrated," O'Neill said, "they felt disenfranchised" because they didn't feel like the Senate president was involved in the community. "What I focused on were issues in the district and individual taxpayers." He said "a long list of issues," were a factor in his upset win, including the expansion of hours at Twin River, land issues concerning North Providence's Camp Meehan on the Lime Rock border, the failure of the Senate to pass a bill that would have required members to pay 10 percent of the cost of their health insurance, Rhode Island's 8.8 percent unemployment rate and the budget deficit. O'Neill, who retired as a senior manager at Texas Instruments said he intends to focus on the budget when he takes his seat on Smith Hill in January. Contrasting himself with Montalbano, who has a busy law practice and is municipal court judge in North Providence, O'Neill said, "I'm retired, so I can focus my energy on taking care of my constituents. Asked whether he would caucus with Democrats or Republicans in the Senate, O'Neill said he expects to see a "reform caucus" of Democrats, Republicans and independents form when the Senate reconvenes. Surrounded by General Assembly supporters at a reception at Bloopers Bar and Grille in North Providence, Montalbano seemed to be taking his loss in stride. The Senate president said he is convinced that "the message of change resonated in this district. "I've had the honor of representing my constituents in this district for 20 years and I accept their decision tonight and I thank them for the years of public service I was able to provide. Life will go on. "My race was high profile and I give my opponent a lot of credit. He worked hard and got himself out there. He had the courage of his convictions and he went after it and I wish him well." Montalbano said he would likely value his new status as private citizen and probably will not seek elective office two years from now. He was reluctant to speculate on who might succeed him in picking up the Senate gavel, but said, his second-in-command Teresa Paiva Weed "has been an outstanding majority leader. She would certainly be a formidable candidate (for Senate President) and one who I would support." During the campaign, O'Neill attacked "the General Assembly's insular

leadership and infamous backroom dealings.” After coming in second in a five-way race for town administrator two years ago, O’Neill mounted his independent bid for the Senate. The candidates squabbled over who should get credit for preventing a proposed state courthouse from being built on land between CCRI and Davies Vocational School. Montalbano said he worked with Chief Justice Frank William to get the prospective project moved to Smithfield. O’Neill, who headed up the “Stop the Courthouse Committee” to fight said it was a grass roots “community action” that got the CCRI site nixed. “It was the voters of Lime Rock that got it done and with no help from Montalbano,” he stated in a campaign press release. Montalbano pointed to his sponsorship of numerous economic development bills, including the Jobs Growth Act of 2005 he says attracted 1,000 new jobs to the state, the film and television tax credit that brought independent and major studio motion pictures as well as the cable television series “Brotherhood” and the Historic Preservation Tax Credit that saw the renovation of numerous old mill structures into new businesses and condominiums. Calling himself “a leader on the energy assistance issue,” he took credit for working with the Public Utilities Commission to mitigate energy price increases. He also boasted of getting an additional funding for Lincoln from bills involving the sale and expansion of hours at the Twin River casino in Lime Rock.