

OPINION > THE COLUMN

Mercier draws familiar ally in fight against sanctuary state



U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy III said last week he believes U.S. Sen. Edward Markey is “a good man,” but he is weighing a primary challenge against the senator to bring “new ideas and a new approach.”



By **STAFF**

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BRINGING A hot button national issue to the Lowell City Council Chamber hasn't always worked out for councilors.

This week, Councilor Rita Mercier asked the City Council to support a resolution against the Safe Communities Act, a bill moving through the state legislature that would limit how state and local communities interact with federal immigration enforcement.

Before speaking on her motion, about a dozen opponents unleashed on the veteran councilor for 45 minutes.

When Mercier did get her chance, she was booed and hissed.

"I'm not against immigrants. I'm against the word of people that are illegal ... You break the law, you rape a child, you do anything else, you should go," Mercier said.

The group erupted and was quickly quieted by Mayor William Samaras.

The motion was shot down in a 5-3 vote. One of the votes in support was cast by Councilor Rodney Elliott, who found himself in a similar position three years ago. Mercier also got support from Councilor David Conway.

That time, his proposal to support a state transgender-rights bathroom bill packed dozens into City Council Chambers.

They held signs with the words "Discrimination has no place in Massachusetts" and "Is this a joke?"

Many, including people who identified as transgender, said opposing the state bill was discriminatory.

In that case, the City Council reversed the motion to one of support for the state bill, passing the resolution 8-1, with only Elliott in opposition.

This week, Councilor Edward Kennedy said he would have probably proposed a similar reversal if Councilor Karen Cirillo, one of the most progressive members of City Council, was in attendance.

Kennedy, like several others in the chamber, also questioned why this issue was in front of the City Council in the first place.

"This resolution is going to have absolutely no bearing on what happens to the legislation," he said.

THIS WEEK'S City Council meeting drew an unusually large crowd, but not Councilor Cirillo.

Mayor Samaras, and later Cirillo's campaign manager Lisa Arnold, announced her absence was due to a medical issue.

On Wednesday, Cirillo followed up with a post to her councilor Facebook page.

"I was unable to be there because currently I am at Tufts Medical Center where I am awaiting surgery for a medical issue that needs immediate attention," she wrote.

While at Tufts this week, Cirillo wrote she also agreed to speak to first year medical students to help them gain experience talking to patients.

"Always willing to be of service," she said. "I hope to be back in Lowell soon." The Column sends its best wishes to Cirillo in her recovery.

CITY COUNCILORS thought they had a new city auditor when they voted on Tuesday 6-2 to offer the job to Charles Aganes, of Dracut.

Councilors David Conway and Rodney Elliott cast their votes for a different finalist, Cheryl Dick.

Kara McSwiggin, who is local and related by marriage to former City Councilor Stephen Gendron, was also a finalist for the position.

Perhaps Dick and McSwiggin will get another bite at the apple.

Late last week, Aganes notified Mayor Samaras he doesn't want the job.

Aganes is a licensed Certified Public Accountant with a bachelors and masters degree in accounting from the University of Massachusetts Lowell. He previously worked as an auditor at Moody, Famiglietti & Andronico, a financial consultant in Tewksbury.

Most recently, he has worked as a senior accountant and accounting manager at Infraredx, Inc., a medical manufacturer in Burlington.

"When the job opening came up I was extremely interested because it seemed like a very, very, very diverse skill set required," Aganes told the City Council during his interview. "Public speaking, which I've always enjoyed, learning a new system, interacting with departments and just a wider range of responsibility."

The council's decision comes after two rounds of applications and a boost to the offered salary range. The job posting offered a \$100,000 to \$113,000 salary with an additional \$4,500 stipend for serving on the city's Retirement Board.

Former City Auditor Bryan Perry left the position in mid-June to take a similar role in Wilmington. He started the position in Lowell in March 2016.

LOWELL HAS its fair share of buildings and locations bearing the Tsongas name.

Add a bridge to that list. But this bridge — the new bridge in the Hamilton Canal Innovation District — isn't named for former senator and presidential primary candidate Paul Tsongas.

It's for his widow, recently retired U.S. Rep. Niki Tsongas.

The City Council voted to name the new construction the Nicola S. Tsongas Bridge, citing her contributions to the district over her twelve years in office and securing of \$2 million in federal funding to help build the bridge.

Rep. Lori Trahan, who now holds the 3rd District seat, spoke in favor of the naming at the City Council meeting Tuesday night.

"Congresswoman Tsongas was known on Capitol Hill for being an effective leader someone who wasn't afraid to roll up her sleeves and use the power that comes with her position to make our community a better place," Trahan said.

The naming was swift compared to other naming debates in the city, most recently over Roberto Clemente Park.

Samaras said an ordinance passed by the City Council earlier this year establishing the Monument Committee to handle the naming and dedication of public spaces was created to make a process for groups to apply to name or dedicate public spaces and does not apply to the city-owned bridge.

DURING AN interview with The Sun this week about her recent Israel trip, Trahan spoke about her "unbelievably powerful" experience at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, and the parallels she saw between President Donald Trump's endless "fake news" rants against the media and how the Nazis undermined Germany's democratic institutions and the free press.

Trahan said she grew up reading the Boston Herald, the Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times.

"I've never read anything except for the phone book that doesn't have bias," Trahan said. "The key is understanding what the bias is."

She said she believes the American people are smart and can discern that.

"I think when you start attacking all media as fake, you undermine the independence, the freedoms that our country was built on, and that is very dangerous propaganda for the leader of our country to be spewing each day," Trahan said.

MONTHS HAVE passed since two campaign finance watchdog groups raised red flags about the financing of Trahan's congressional campaign last fall. Looks like several more months will pass before the district gets anything official from the Federal Election Commission, or FEC.

Following Trahan's squeaker of a win against Dan Koh last September in the Democratic primary, complaints were filed with the FEC by the Campaign Legal Center and Foundation for Accountability and Civic Trust focusing on Trahan's last minute spending extravaganza before the Sept. 4 primary, which, by the way, was always her plan.

In summary, the complaints raised questions about the origin of the campaign cash, about \$270,000.

The Trahan has been steadfast in saying all contributions to the campaign were by the books.

Just earlier this month, campaign spokesman Mark McDevitt said: "The complaint in question is without merit. Any questions would have to be directed to the FEC."

Which brings us to the FEC. Various accounts across national media platforms last week reported the FEC is basically shut down.

The commission's vice chairman, Matthew Petersen, is resigning at the end of the month. With him gone, the FEC will be down to three members and will not have a quorum.

According to one NPR report, it's not clear how long the FEC will be effectively shut down. President Trump nominated a Republican to serve on the commission, but the Senate has not yet acted on the nomination.

In the past, nominees have been paired, with one from each party.

Congressional Democrats have yet to announce any nominees from their party.

Former FEC chair Michael Toner says he fears there is a "real possibility" the FEC could lack a quorum through the 2020 election. Oh, the 2020 election: a Trahan-Koh rematch?

THE FOUR governors meeting Boston last week to talk traffic had much less to say when asked about next year's presidential election.

Gov. Charlie Baker hosted fellow Republican Govs. Larry Hogan of Maryland and Chris Sununu of New Hampshire and Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo for a transportation infrastructure summit at the Fairmont Copley Plaza. During a media availability, a question about whether the trio of popular GOP governors was ready to offer any endorsements in what's now a three-way race in their party's presidential primary was met mostly with deflections.

Former Illinois Congressman Joe Walsh has jumped into the race, joining former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld in challenging President Donald Trump from within the Republican Party.

Hogan, chair of the National Governors Association, responded first, telling reporters, "You should probably talk to the governor of New Hampshire, he comes up first."

"Apparently, I'm the only one that knows who's gonna win," Sununu said, drawing laughs.

Baker, standing between Hogan and Sununu, repeated the rationale he used in explaining his choice to stay out of the 2016 general election, when he did not vote for either Trump or Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"I have a very busy and complicated day job, and that's been my focus and it's going to stay my focus," said Baker, who has occasionally been critical of Trump and served in Weld's administration during the 1990s.

Hogan then chimed back in to say, "The good news for me is, as chairman of the National Governors Association, I get to be a non-partisan governor representing Democrats and Republicans, and I don't get involved in primary fights."

Baker, Hogan, and Sununu are respectively the top three most popular governors in the country, according to Morning Consult's most recent approval rankings.

Raimondo, a Democrat, said no when asked if she had a favorite in the race.

AS HE gears up his reelection campaign, U.S. Sen. Ed Markey has been touting the endorsements of 116 members of the state Legislature — including the top leaders of both branches — spanning the moderate to the progressive ends of the Democratic Party.

Markey's announcement of the endorsements Tuesday came just minutes after U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy III publicly weighed a primary challenge against Markey.

Previously announced challengers include labor attorney Shannon Liss-Riordan and businessman Steve Pemberton.

Several local lawmakers are backing Markey, including state Sens. Michael Barrett and Jamie Eldridge, and state Reps. Tami Gouveia, Jim Arciero, Colleen Garry, Rady Mom, David Robertson and Tram Nguyen.

Gouveia, of Acton, whose district includes Chelmsford Precincts 1 and 9, said she views Markey as a longtime champion of the people he's represented throughout his political career, which goes back to the 1970s when he was a state representative before first being elected to Congress.

"I think he's been a real champion for all the issues the people in my district really care about to things that impact people across the state," Gouveia said. Those key areas include the environment and climate change — including releasing the Green New Deal with U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York — fighting for single-payer healthcare and equal rights for all people, including women, people of color and the LGBTQ community, Gouveia said.

"I think he's doing a phenomenal job and I would love to see him continue in his role as our junior senator from Massachusetts," she said.

Asked for her thoughts about the potential challenge from Kennedy, Gouveia said it's great when people step up with new ideas, and the voters will decide.

"I don't think competition is a bad thing for incumbents, but I really want to see Ed Markey back in that seat," she said.

THE COLUMN caught up with Gouveia while she was in California seeing her son off to college, but she was excited to discuss upcoming hearings on two of her bills.

One seeks to hold opioid manufacturers accountable for their role in contributing to the opioid epidemic by assessing them taxes that would go into a stewardship fund to give municipal first responders better access to the overdose-reversing drug Narcan.

The other seeks a pilot study to test out whether providing people with fentanyl test strips might curb opioid use. Both are scheduled to go before the Joint Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use and Recovery — of which Gouveia is a member — on Wednesday.

IN CHELMSFORD, some Jewish residents expressed discontent with the Dog Association's recent changes to their next two meeting dates, specifically toward one meeting that takes place on the same night Yom Kippur finishes. Earlier this week, the association — which oversees the town's dog park on Richardson Road — announced changes to their September and October public meeting dates from Sept. 17 to Sept. 18 and Oct. 8 to Oct. 9 on their Facebook page.

Yom Kippur, the holiest day of Judaism, runs from sundown on Oct. 8 until sundown on Oct. 9. President Will Wagner said over the phone that the changes were due to "conflicting schedules" and board members' lack of availability during the month of October.

When posted on the group's Facebook page, Jewish residents commented that the meeting date conflicts with one of the faith's holiest days and asked for the board to meet at any other date in October to no avail.

"I understand the meetings having been moved due to schedule of the board, but to echo It does prevent members of the Jewish community from being able to take part in the meeting," one person wrote on the post. "Could the dates be switched to Thursday or shifted to Monday? Even though services and the holiday technically end at a certain time most people will likely get together with family."

"Unfortunately, the board availability in October is limited," Wagner replied back to the comment.

"How about the following week?" one person asked, replying to Wagner.

"Unfortunately, the board availability in October is limited," Wagner wrote again.

"No disrespect was intended," Wagner said over the phone to The Sun, adding that October's meeting technically takes place after Yom Kippur. Traditionally, families celebrate Yom Kippur at the end of the day with a feast due to fasting for 25 hours.

"Open meetings require at least six members of the board available in order to make a quorum," Wagner added. "I do understand that many people might not be able to make it but we have to have at least six people to host a meeting and we are very limited in the days we can meet."

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THE SMELL of Willowdale Farms has apparently returned, according to horrified abutters who worry about potential health risks and the way they say the stench has had a detrimental effect on their lives.

A few years ago, the Board of Selectmen deferred the grievance to the recently formed Agricultural Commission, the members of which were tasked with finding a resolution between farm owner Steve Caggiano and nearby residents.

So what happened?

“By adding more fencing, he increased areas where he could spread the cows out more,” Selectman Rick Reault, who sits on the commission, said of Caggiano. “He also limed his fields. That’s a way to control the smell, and so we’re still kind of working and figuring out everything, but Steve has always been very cooperative and evidently something’s going on that we haven’t figured out.”

Reault said the farm along Willowdale Road has always passed state and local inspections.

“That being said, there certainly is a smell there,” he said. “We’ll be looking at it again.”

The farm’s smell resurfaced again last Tuesday after a Conservation Commission public hearing centered on a notice of intent recently filed by Caggiano.

The business owner filed the notice for an “after-the-fact limited project” after the town learned that he had done unauthorized work on the wetlands on his property.

Residents packed Town Hall’s Community Room and unleashed their frustrations about how the smell has hindered their ability to enjoy their own homes.

They also expressed concern over cows’ waste on the farm and how it could possibly be contaminating area water sources. Caggiano defended his farm, saying officials and departments have been there multiple times over the years.

“There’s absolutely no violations at the farm. Cows stink and we’re doing our best,” Caggiano said. “Pick any cow farm on the planet, they stink. Cows stink.”

This week’s Column was prepared by Reporters Amaris Castillo in Tyngsboro; Elizabeth Dobbins in Lowell; Alana Melanson in Chelmsford and Lowell; Luke O’Roark in Chelmsford; the State House News Service; and Enterprise Editor Christopher Scott.

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