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Budget watchdog to run for mayor

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By [Alon Harish](#)

Tuesday, June 14, 2011

The number of people running against Mayor John DeStefano Jr. grew to four Tuesday.

Social worker and city budget watchdog Jeffrey Kerekes launched Tuesday his campaign to replace DeStefano, who is running for a record tenth term. In an interview Tuesday, Kerekes said in the city's political structure, significant change can only come from the top.

"If we want to change the city, we have to change the mayor," said Kerekes, a Wooster Square resident.

Kerekes's decision to run for the city's highest office came about through a gradual evolution, he said, not strategic planning.

Kerekes and a neighbor were summarily ignored by the Board of Aldermen in fall 2005, when they suggested what he called "simple solutions" for raising revenue and cutting expenses, he said. Ever since then, he has established himself as a presence at Board of Aldermen meetings, often testifying on budget matters at public hearings. In 2006, he co-founded New Haven Citizens Action Network (NHCAN), a watchdog group that he said warned the DeStefano administration about the city's fiscal problems years before officials were forced to acknowledge them.

"I cannot in good conscience advocate only from the sidelines anymore," Kerekes wrote in a letter announcing his candidacy.

While DeStefano has belatedly begun to realize the need for reforms to the city's employee compensation agreements, Kerekes said, he has only paid them lip service. After 18 years as mayor, neither taxpayers nor unionized city workers trust DeStefano to "do the right thing" anymore, Kerekes said, and for good reason.

Kerekes, who has never held public office, said he would pursue reforms to the city charter that would cap mayoral terms at four, echoing a call by mayoral candidate Robert Lee. Because DeStefano has served so long as mayor, he said, he has lost touch with the public and become "too comfortable."

A stark example of the need for change at the top, Kerekes said, the mayor's record on education reform. While DeStefano has made several strides in recent years toward making improving the city's schools his

legacy, he has not replaced the administrators "responsible for decades of failed school leadership," Kerekes said in his letter.

"While getting on the bandwagon [of education reform] late is better than never, with the salaries we pay our top education leadership, we should have the nations best education reformers with a history of delivering results," Kerekes wrote in his letter. "Today, we have temples for schools but students protesting that they have no or inadequate books for learning."

Also on Kerekes' platform are suggestions for more efficient deployment of police officers and enhanced transparency at City Hall, which he said is rife with patronage and cronyism.

Kerekes will compete in the Sept. 13 Democratic primary with DeStefano, civil rights activist Clifton Graves and former aldermen Lee and Tony Dawson.

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