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This Time, West Rock Lines Up With Mayor

BY **Thomas MacMillan** | JUL 7, 2011 8:21 AM
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THOMAS MACMILLAN PHOTOS

DeStefano, Graves, Dawson, Kerekes (clockwise from top left).



Venturing into historically unfriendly territory, incumbent John DeStefano won the first Iowa-like straw poll in this year's mayoral race. An opponent offered a different spin on the results: The real winner was anyone-but-DeStefano.

That was the analysis of mayoral candidate Clifton Graves, one of four Democrats seeking to make the ballot to challenge nine-term incumbent DeStefano in a Sept. 13 Democratic Party primary.

Graves finished last in a ward Democratic committee endorsement vote in West Rock Wednesday night. He received one vote, while Mayor DeStefano won four. Tony Dawson and Jeffrey Kerekes, two other mayoral candidates, received three and two votes, respectively.

The evening provided a first chance for the four candidates (a fifth putative contender, [former alderman Robert Lee](#), didn't show) to make pitches potential supporters from the same platform. Tony Dawson used the opportunity to call for firing the mayorally appointed members of the Board of Education.

In one way Wednesday night's endorsement vote was a significant showing for DeStefano. Often overlooked Ward 30, which represents the mostly African-American and working-class and lower-income neighborhoods on both sides of West Rock, has produced some of the only consistent opposition to his reign in office. As far back as 1999 it was producing one of only two ward votes out of 30 citywide against the mayor. Two years ago, when DeStefano ran unopposed for the party nomination, the ward declined to endorse him anyway, the only ward to do that. It sends the most consistently critical legislator to the Board of Aldermen, in the form of Darnell Goldson. The ward committee Wednesday night unanimously endorsed Darnell Goldson's run for his second term.

Seen another way—by Graves—DeStefano's victory represents a poor showing for an 18-year incumbent. More people cast votes against DeStefano than for him, Graves observed after the vote.

The election, held in ward committee co-chair Honda Smith's backyard, means that DeStefano now has the official backing of Democrats in Ward 30, which comprises the West Rock and West Hills neighborhoods.

The backyard politicking gave each candidate a chance to pitch his case directly to the committee members. Dawson was the first local candidate to speak at the event, which kicked off shortly past 6 p.m. behind Smith's house on Harper Avenue.



As a hot sun sank low in the west, the sounds of smooth jazz wafted down the street. The tunes were provided by 14-year-old Mark Wilson on keys and 15-year-old Corey Stagers, son of former aldermanic candidate [Carlton Stagers](#), on the saxophone.

Before their formal remarks, the candidates worked the line of ward committee members, seated off to one side.



Bysiewicz.

Former Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz greeted the couple-dozen people in attendance. She reminded them she's running for U.S. Senate in 2012.

After people helped themselves to spread of salads, sauerkraut, burgers, and dogs, each candidate was given three minutes to address the committee. Some themes emerged: crime, jobs, education, transparency.

Dawson made a splash by coming down hard on the Board of Ed. He said he'd "eliminate everyone on the Board of Ed" if elected. He said educational administration in the city is in "terrible" shape.

DeStefano, who was next in the alphabetical order, touted his achievements in education. He said nearby [Katherine Brennan](#) school has improved and created "a culture of success." DeStefano also spoke about job growth in New Haven and what needs to be done to tackle crime.

Graves launched his three minutes with a maritime metaphor. He said the city is a ship lost at sea, with an experienced yet incompetent captain, a frustrated crew, and angry and anguished passengers, the taxpayers. To make matters worse, the ship is leaking due to a financial crisis. Graves presented himself as a "new vision, new voice, for New Haven."

Kerekes offered a different transportation metaphor. He called the mayor a "roadblock." He asked if people are happier with schools, safety, and tax bills than they were 18 years ago. He promised transparency and close budget-trimming of the kind that [he's advocated](#) as a budget watchdog.





Smith read aloud the votes aloud while her co-chair Cassandra Lang tallied the results. DeStefano was not around to make a victory speech, having left shortly after his own remarks, citing a prior 7 p.m. commitment.

The other candidates offered their analyses. Dawson campaign manager Bob McCormack noted that it was a close vote. Dawson was just one vote behind DeStefano. "We've got some work to do," he said.

The vote showed a dissatisfaction with the mayor, Graves said. He said it's not a good sign for the mayor to win with such a slim margin. "It's clearly not a mandate," Graves said. "Tony, Jeffrey, and I got more votes than the mayor."

Asked later about Graves' statements, DeStefano campaign manager Danny Kedem said this: "We take this election very seriously, and we don't take any vote for granted. And while we believe the mayor is the best candidate for the job, we take this election every seriously."

Kerekes agreed with Graves' analysis. He expressed satisfaction with the results. "It's still early," he said. "People don't know all the candidates."

That unfamiliarity locked in at least one DeStefano vote. "I know John DeStefano.," a committee member, who asked not to be named. "The others I've never even heard of."

The woman said she doesn't approve of everything DeStefano's done. She said she's unhappy with crime and taxes. But at least she knows what she's getting with him, she said.





Pearson handed her ballot in to Carlton Staggers.

[Esther Pearson](#), another ward Democratic committee member, agreed, to some extent. She said she declined to vote to endorse any of the candidates because while she's not happy with DeStefano, she doesn't think the others are ready.

"Until DeStefano steps up and does what he's supposed to do, he won't get my vote," Pearson said. She said she talked with him at the meeting about the ongoing [neglect of the Ribicoff](#) housing complex in West Rock. She said black mold runs rampant in the apartments and asked the mayor to do something. If DeStefano "steps up to the plate," he'll get her vote, she said. If not, she'll leave the mayoral line blank when it comes time to vote in the primary, she said.



Goldson.

Alderman Goldson later called the ward's choice to endorse DeStefano "an amazing turnaround."

Goldson said he has not yet decided which candidate he will endorse, but that it won't be the current mayor. DeStefano represents more of the "same old, same old," Goldson said. "I think the ward committee thinks DeStefano has the power to make changes in the ward. That's not the position that I agree with."



Honda Smith.

Smith said she was not surprised by the poll results. Ward 30 is unpredictable, she said. "Anything is liable to happen."

Smith's brother, Ron Smith, received the ward's endorsement for another term as town clerk over Dawson's running mate, [Claudia Herrera](#).





Ron Smith.

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