

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Kerekes Stumps For The Black Vote

BY **Paul Bass** | SEP 22, 2011 8:00 AM

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Civil-rights activist Michael Jefferson helped Jeffrey Kerekes relaunch his mayoral campaign with a passionate pitch aimed at crucial voters: African-Americans,

Jefferson (at left in photo), a local defense attorney and [longtime critic](#) of incumbent Mayor John DeStefano, endorsed Kerekes (at right) at a press conference Wednesday evening outside Newhallville's Lincoln-Bassett School.

Violence, infant mortality, and school failure are devastating the African-American community, Jefferson said. He laid the blame at the door of DeStefano, who's seeking a record 10th term in office in the Nov. 8 general election. DeStefano beat Kerekes and three other Democrats [in a Sept. 13 primary](#). Now Kerekes is running as an independent; the Wednesday event marked a relaunching of his campaign.

Jefferson provided the fuel. And he offered insight into the mathematical calculations the Kerekes camp is envisioning an uphill victory.

"I want to appeal to the African-American community," Jefferson declared. "Our community is in shambles. Crime is rampant. Our schools have become drop-out factories.

“What is wrong with the African-American community that we keep voting for this man [DeStefano]? Our children do not matter to him. Nor do the communities in which we live...

“John DeStefano has stood idly by while murder has run rampant in the black community ... He has done nothing but watch our people die.”

[Click here](#) to read the full text of Jefferson’s remarks.

[Gary Highsmith](#), a former New Haven principal who now runs Hamden High School and lives in New Haven, also endorsed Kerekes.



He couldn’t make it to the event; his endorsement was ready by Dwight activist Christine Bartlett-Josie (at center in photo).

Highsmith, who like Jefferson is African-American (Kerekes and DeStefano are white), argued that DeStefano “deliberately stifles freedom of speech.”

He cited the recent move by Wilbur Cross High School’s principal to [throw out the results of a student council election](#) when an outspoken student won the presidency, then to [disband the council altogether](#). DeStefano defended the principal’s moves [in a mayoral debate](#).

Highsmith also criticized the DeStefano campaign’s practice of [soliciting and accepting campaign donations from Board of Ed employees](#). ([Click here](#) to read the full text of Highsmith’s statement.)

In his remarks, Kerekes called for a return to community policing, a hybrid elected-appointed Board of Education including parents, and higher standards for failing schools. Standing by the entrance to Lincoln-Bassett, he congratulated that school for just [emerging from a federal “watch list”](#) of troubled schools—and noted that two dozen other city schools remain on that list.

“The mayor deeply cares about all the residents of New Haven,” DeStefano campaign manager Danny Kedem

responded Wednesday night. “He is happy to debate as the Democratic nominee Mr. Kerekes on the issues and have a robust discussion.”

Kedem credited DeStefano for “having created [New Haven Promise](#), which allows all New Haven children the opportunity to earn the right to attend college. He’s proud of creating world-class facilities for our children to study within and also institute a somewhat unprecedented school reform effort in the city.”

Hopeful Math

Jefferson called the black vote crucial to Kerekes prevailing in November. In the Sept. 13 primary, two black candidates, Anthony Dawson and Clifton Graves, collected around 33 percent of the vote combined. Their votes drew heavily from black neighborhoods. (Kerekes got 22 percent of the vote, DeStefano, 44 percent.)

If all those black voters come to Kerekes’ side, Jefferson said, Kerekes’ victory would be a “foregone conclusion.”

Asked Wednesday if he’s endorsing Kerekes, Clifton Graves responded, “We’re still assessing.” Dawson could not be reached for comment.

Jefferson also pointed out at the press conference that only [29 percent of Democrats](#) voted in that primary. That means that most Democrats didn’t vote—and the majority of those who did, voted against DeStefano. That also means 71 percent of the party’s 45,449 registered voters, more than 30,000, are up for grabs. That’s on top of a few thousand Republicans and Greens, as well as some 15,000 registered independents.

If every one of Kerekes’s 2,895 primary voters convinces five other people to pull the Kerekes lever in November, Jefferson noted, the election is his. DeStefano collected 5,716 votes in the election. The winner of the November election is expected to collect fewer than 10,000 votes.

“We can make history,” Jefferson declared. “Everyone—Get five!”

Challenging Math

Some other mathematical calculations make Kerekes’ November quest potentially more daunting than his primary quest.

His campaign begins with no money. He had to spend all his approximately \$30,000 raised to date in the primary in order to qualify for public matching funds under New Haven’s Democracy Fund system.

Meanwhile, DeStefano chose not to participate in that system—and went about hitting up enough government appointees and contractors for up to \$1,000 apiece to [bring in \\$425,000 at least check](#), and counting. DeStefano has a paid staff. Kerekes doesn’t. DeStefano can do polls and advertise on TV. Kerekes won’t be able to.



Former Dixwell Alderman Drew King showed up to support Kerekes because, he said, “I’m just tired of seeing the young blacks dying in the street and the mayor standing by and doing

Another problematic number: ground troops. To wage a victorious campaign, Kerekes will need well over 100 people working in all 30 of the city’s wards pulling votes. And first he’ll need to identify at least 8,000 to 10,000 likely voters to try to pull when election day arrives. The one campaign to pull new voters to the polls on primary day was the Yale union-led drive to elect new candidates to the Board of Aldermen; it had a [seasoned vote-puller at its helm](#), a team of candidates with supporters in 15 city wards, and some \$200,000.

Kerekes said he had 60 workers on primary day. He said his team did identify 4,000 potential Kerekes voters (“ones and twos” in campaign parlance) in advance of that primary. He said he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to mount 30 ward-level pulling operations on election day. He did say his team is starting to raise money again and to solicit volunteers like the people who showed up at his Wednesday event at Lincoln-Bassett.

On top of that, DeStefano has routinely won the African-American vote when he runs against a white opponent,

nothing.”

including state Sen. Martin Looney, who challenged him in 2001.

In addition, New Haven has largely stopped voting in municipal elections. Including all those independents. Candidates need almost heroic efforts to entice new voters to the polls; cynicism about government tends to depress turnout, while a hopeful message (Barack Obama in in 2008, New Haven Mayor John Daniels in 1989) has brought out black voters in large numbers.

That math explained why one leading African-American politician [who beat the DeStefano party machine to win his seat](#) did not join the Kerekes endorsement event Wednesday.

That politician, State Rep. Gary Holder-Winfield, said he has serious policy differences with Mayor DeStefano. But he said he’s hesitant to simply endorse anyone who runs against the mayor. He said he’d want to see that candidate have a real shot at winning; he said he hasn’t seen evidence of that yet from the Kerekes campaign.

Holder-Winfield said he believes many African-Americans who votes for Graves or Dawson will return to DeStefano in November even if they disagree with him—because DeStefano will be running on the Democratic line. “I think there are some people who may be opposed to the mayor staying the mayor. But once you get past the Democratic primary, they stay loyal to the party,” Holder-Winfield said.

“I would want to use my endorsement judiciously; I would want that person to actually win,” Holder-Winfield said. “I’m not at the place where I’m certain that that would be the case” with Kerekes.

Kerekes said he’s hoping that widespread dissatisfaction with DeStefano, and a grassroots desire for change, will overcome the mayor’s financial advantage.

Kerekes said his team may have fewer dollars, but “we also don’t have the same 18 years of neglect of the city” that DeStefano has.

Comments

posted by: WC10 on September 22, 2011 8:10am

What a pitiful turnout. For someone who’s announcing a campaign against a powerful, well funded, and organized competitor, you’d think the Kerekes campaign would have been able to get more than 15 people to turn out at this event.

Even more pathetic are the endorsements. Christine i... had already given her support to Kerekes in the Primary, so that’s not news.

Jefferson is a political strategist who’s support also means nothing.

Graves and Dawson will be supporting the Mayor, or no one at all. Sorry Kerekes, this sad showing means you’ve lost. Time to start making deals to save yourself.

posted by: Morris Cove Mom on September 22, 2011 8:12am

Thank goodness for this! Some people are voting for DeStefano just because he stands next to Dr. Mayo. While Dr. Mayo is nice, he is not doing a good job leading the city’s school system, and is being forced to stand next to the Mayor, to boot! So I can’t support that kind of forced relationship between two.... I am hoping to see more people of color stand up with Jeff Kerekes, and vote for him this November.