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Former DeStefano foe Anthony Dawson now backs the New Haven mayor

Published: Saturday, October 29, 2011



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NEW HAVEN — Former mayoral challenger and Mayor John DeStefano Jr. critic Anthony Dawson on Friday announced his endorsement for DeStefano.

Dawson was intensely critical of DeStefano during his campaign for mayor ahead of last month's Democratic primary, but he said now that's he's out of the race, he stands behind the mayor.

"At the end of the day, Mayor DeStefano is the only candidate in the general election who truly can change what's going on in New Haven," he said.

Also Friday, West Rock Alderman Darnell Goldson, D-30, gave his endorsement to DeStefano's opponent, budget watchdog Jeffrey Kerekes.

"New Haven deserves a mayor whose main focus is on the residents of New Haven, and not big out-of-town developers or highly paid employees who drive out of town every afternoon," Goldson said in an email.

Dawson appeared with DeStefano in front of the John C. Daniels School of International Communication and vowed to work with the mayor and the community to "change the pattern of murder and crime in New Haven." He said he shares DeStefano's vision of building a partnership between police and the community, and he said he would work with incoming Police Chief Dean Esserman.

DeStefano praised Dawson as a leader in the Hill neighborhood and said the two go far back in their relationship.

“People think of campaigns often times as antagonistic contests where people are fighting each other, but the primary was a respectful discussion about what is important in the city,” DeStefano said. “I thought Tony meaningfully contributed to that.”

However, two Kerekes supporters — civil rights lawyer Michael Jefferson and Hamden High School Principal Gary Highsmith, a New Haven resident, came down hard on Dawson for changing his stance on DeStefano. In a combined statement, the two leaders accused Dawson of betraying his platform and selling out his supporters. They point to Dawson’s former campaign literature accusing the mayor of “doing nothing” while “our children are murdered.”

Reached by phone Friday, Jefferson said politicians must be held accountable for their actions.

“In effect, Gary (Highsmith) and I were speaking to the hurt and frustration of those supporters, and we welcome them into the Kerekes camp,” he said.

Dawson said he was disappointed from the beginning that Highsmith and Jefferson didn’t reach out and support one of the black candidates running for mayor in the primary. He also said neither man has served as a public servant, as Dawson, a former longtime alderman, did.

“I missed 16 years of dinner with my family to be out there,” he said.

In Goldson’s statement supporting Kerekes, he criticized the mayor on issues of education, sky-high taxes, excessive spending, public safety problems and not having enough youth services.

“Jeffrey Kerekes represents a fresh voice and a new direction for this city,” said Goldson, who faces a challenge from Democrat Carlton Staggers in Ward 30.

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