

Cracks in the foundation?

■ The GOP grip on Brookhaven could weaken amid scandal and LaValle's departure

BY JOHN ZAHER

Republican Brookhaven Supervisor John Jay LaValle's announcement that he will not seek re-election ended months of speculation.

Despite a long list of accomplishments, the reform-minded supervisor faced a re-election challenge from Democratic County Legis. Brian Foley of Blue Point. If the series of Brookhaven scandals widens, Republicans could lose control of the town.

Such a dramatic shift would bring a fundamental realignment in Suffolk, tipping the balance of power to Democrats and causing a shift of strength among Republicans.

At present, Republicans hold six of seven Brookhaven Town Board seats, and seven of 10 Brookhaven seats in the Suffolk County Legislature. To avert losses, Brookhaven Republicans will need to rely on a strong showing by their council members or choose a candidate distant from scandal who can provide a fresh face to lead them through what may become an epic Long Island political struggle.

Even before LaValle's announcement, Foley would

have been a formidable candidate. Foley, term-limited in his current job, represents the South Shore of Brookhaven. Known for his efforts on education and health issues, he is popular and running from a strong base.

This, combined with Democratic strength on the North Shore — bolstered by the generally liberal Stony Brook University community — gives Foley strength in about 40 percent of the township. If the corruption probe continues to widen, Foley's chances are likely to increase.

If LaValle remained the candidate, a widening scandal on his watch would have hurt his candidacy.

Now Foley will face an unknown factor. Names mentioned as Republican candidates for supervisor include Councilman Ed Hennessey and Joe Caracappa, presiding

officer of the Suffolk Legislature. Hennessey is a formidable prospective candidate who has made every effort to distance himself from LaValle and the ruling factions in the Brookhaven Republican Committee. Democrats undoubtedly will seek, nonetheless, to link him with the town establishment that allowed the scandals to fester. His greatest weakness as a candidate is that he has served on the town board for 10 years.

While Hennessey would match up well against Foley

publicans' best chance for continued power will lie in the their council candidates. With the exception of Hennessey and Geraldine Esposito, each is in a first full term. Hennessey was the highest vote-getter in the last election, and Esposito also has proved popular with the electorate. Republicans may prefer that the incumbents run for re-election and help their chances to maintain control of the town board.

Further, as the result of a voter initiative passed in 2002, each candidate runs from a single-member district representing about 75,000 residents, rather than running townwide. While council districts may make it easier for underfunded candidates to carry out grassroots campaigns, if the scandal widens, it may also improve the ability of Republican council members to distance themselves from the investigation, the party and its past.

LaValle's decision also elevates the position of a rival on the countywide scene, Islip Supervisor Pete McGowan, who could play a key role in electing the next Suffolk Republican county chair.

The Brookhaven Republican scandals, similar to Nassau's fiscal problems, may in the end accelerate national trends of growing Democratic strength in the Northeast. Suffolk has seen the Democrats gain in Babylon, Huntington and on the East End while electing a Democrat county executive.

Though Republicans remain strong on the national scene, confidence may be hard to find this week around Brookhaven Town Hall.



ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIN KOZLOWSKI

and could win, Republicans may be best served by choosing a candidate less identified with the current town government. Few candidates other than Caracappa would fit that profile.

If the supervisor candidate is unable to distance himself from the Suffolk district attorney's investigation of political corruption in town government and Foley wins, the Re-



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