

# Thomas Richards readies for Rochester mayoral run

Brian Sharp • Staff writer • December 17, 2010

Even before City Council settled on a special election as the best way to replace departing Rochester Mayor Robert Duffy, Thomas Richards quietly hit the campaign trail.

Richards, 67, began meeting one-on-one with neighborhood Democratic leaders in recent days, seeking to shore up the political support he will need for the party's nomination. He's the city's deputy mayor and soon-to-be interim mayor; he's also the only declared candidate for the permanent job.

Richards' supporters say his experience and his commitment to Duffy's agenda make him a logical successor, something he stressed in an interview this week.

Richards said his priorities and programs will mirror those of Duffy, who is expected to resign effective Jan. 1 when he will be sworn in as the state's next lieutenant governor. Richards will immediately step in as interim mayor.

No other candidates have come forward for the special election, which must occur within 90 days of Duffy's departure. Green Party officials said this week that they would run a candidate, while criticizing council's decision to hold a special election at all. Molly Clifford, who had been preparing to run, said Thursday that she would not and threw her support behind Richards.

"We really think that it's important to settle the question about who is going to be the mayor, and the fastest way to do that is a special election," said Rochester Business Alliance President Sandy Parker, a strong supporter of Richards. "The baton needs to be passed."

But whether or not he's elected, Richards will spend at least three months or so as the city's mayor.

At the top of his to-do list is closing an agreement with PAETEC Holding Corp. to anchor redevelopment of Midtown. Richards briefed City Council on the discussions this week, and council members later said the deal appeared on track to wrap up by year's end.

Shifting political dynamics in both Albany and Washington, D.C., will help determine the city's direction for the coming years, as the city's next mayor must first tackle a projected \$48.5 million budget gap, a pension bill estimated to climb by \$8 million next year and reach \$65 million by 2014-15. The city's entire operating budget for the current fiscal year is \$465 million.

It is this harsh reality and the need for tough decisions and long-term fiscal planning that Richards has spoken of in these initial meetings with party leaders, arranged by Monroe County Democratic Party Chairman Joseph Morelle.

None said Richards asked for their support, at least not before Tuesday's City Council decision. Saul Maneiro, from northeast Rochester, said the conversation "played more like a pitch for Tom, himself, as a candidate for the office." It was the first such detailed conversation Maneiro said he has had with a prospective mayoral candidate.

To the public, Richards — who served until recently as the city's corporation counsel — is the face of big projects, like selling the high-speed ferry or negotiating the Midtown and PAETEC deals.

On a performing arts center at Midtown, Richards

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echoes the positions taken by Duffy and Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks: "It is a good project that is best located downtown and that could be Midtown. The city should support it, but is not in a position to contribute significant financial assistance."

But he is quick to note that big projects will not save the city.

"We would have failed if we got Midtown done and we backed off the commitment we made to neighborhoods over the past five years," he said.

Some party leaders he has spoken with say he would be "the economic development and (project) execution mayor." They use words like genuine, committed, capable and intelligent to describe their first impressions.

"Tom has very great aspirations. I think he is a great guy. There isn't a lot I don't agree with him on. ... His personal ambition or why he wants to do this, I don't question or doubt that," said Anthony Plonczynski, a party leader on the city's east side.

"(But) Tom is putting himself in a position where he has to be a political person. And if he is not going to do the politics, then the question is who is doing the politics for him?"

Richards, who only recently switched from no party to being an enrolled Democrat, acknowledges that could be an issue as he seeks the party's nomination.

"I can't claim any Democratic lineage," he said. "That isn't what drives me, that's true. But in order to be effective as a mayor of the city ... you have to involve yourself in some level of politics, and that's what I've decided to do."

"I've got some things to learn."

As the former president and chief executive of Rochester Gas and Electric Corp., and in other roles he has taken on, politics is not unfamiliar, though not altogether comfortable. Richards said his governing style would be somewhere between Duffy and former Mayor Thomas Ryan. Duffy made a point to be out and seen in the community. Ryan was more of an executive, spending much of his time in the office.

As for how he might campaign, Richards said he

hasn't given it much thought. But people shouldn't be expecting a message that everything will be OK, or that the city will somehow find the money.

"If that is the campaign, I'll lose," Richards said.

On the budget, Richards said, citizens should know "that there are going to be cuts, and those cuts are going to affect services this time." Last year, Duffy closed a \$44 million budget gap in part by draining \$12 million from city reserves, leaving less than \$18 million in the fund.

There is likely no relief coming from the state or federal government. And the city has little or no ability to raise revenues through property taxes, Richards said, because the tax base is insufficient, as is citizens' ability to pay.

Beyond that, Richards is vague, saying the situation requires a multi-year solution and context from Albany.

Like Duffy, Richards plans to lobby Albany to push for initiatives to benefit the city, and then react to those changes so the city sees the greatest benefit. Duffy didn't return phone calls seeking comment for this article.

As for the issue of mayoral control of city schools — a divisive push Duffy made this year, only to see it stall in the state Senate — Richards said he supported the move then, and does now. But will he push for it himself, if elected?

"How much political time and capital we put into it

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will depend on circumstances that develop (in Albany)," Richards said. "In the interim, I don't want this mayoral control to be the only thing we do with the school district. There are lots of things we can do together."

Richards said he would not move forward without City Council support and noted that, even if elected, he would not take office until the end of the legislative session. But he added: "Mayoral control is a way of ... forcing significant change in the school system. It may not be the only way."

In the meantime, he said, the city must be involved in decisions on school facilities modernization. What is built and how it is funded has a significant impact on neighborhoods. Also, the city and school district currently are discussing a career track to improve minority representation in city public safety professions, most notably the police ranks.

Duffy has not endorsed Richards but said this week it was "unthinkable" that another candidate could emerge that would be as qualified as Richards. Ask the Rochester native why he wants to run and the answer is one of obligation.

"I don't want to see this lost," he said, of efforts made by the Duffy administration. "I don't want to see us lose either time, momentum or commitment."

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