

News

Change, challenges in '09

BY JIM HAND SUN CHRONICLE STAFF
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State Rep.-elect Bill Bowles and Attleboro Mayor Kevin Dumas crunch numbers in the mayor's office on a recent afternoon. (Staff photo by Martin Gavin)

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Bowles to advocate for voters

ATTLEBORO - When it comes to Attleboro politics, City Councilor Bill Bowles says there are two groups of people.

One group is the insiders. They consist of officials, activists and residents who follow local affairs closely.

Bowles calls them "The 200" because he estimates that is how many insiders there are.

Then there are the voters. They are everyday people trying to raise a family who may not know all the details of city government, but want good services and schools, as well as reasonable taxes.

Bowles said he has always fared pretty well with the voters because they know he has their interests at heart.



State Rep.-elect Bill Bowles and Attleboro Mayor Kevin Dumas go over numbers in the mayor's office recently. (Staff photo by Martin Gavin)

It is "The 200" with which he has occasionally had trouble.

As he prepares to be sworn in as Attleboro's next state representative on Jan. 7, Bowles said he has a goal of continuing to be an advocate for residents and taxpayers, while trying to shore up his relationships with some of the insiders.

The relationships have been strained at times because he has gone against the grain in asking tough questions of the redevelopment authority before it was fashionable, fighting for lower water rates and working to lessen big pay raises for the mayor, department heads and his fellow city councilors.

The moves by Bowles have earned him a reputation as a fiscal watchdog, but also caused other officials to accuse him of being a publicity hound.

"I'm not immune to the fact that I have offended some of the establishment," Bowles said.

A Democrat, Bowles said he also wants to reach out to Republicans who did not support his election.

Bowles said there still might be some lingering hard feelings toward him from Republicans because of the switch in parties he made several years ago.

Bowles was originally a Republican and ran unsuccessfully for state representative in 1990 under the GOP banner.

In succeeding years, he moved into the independent category, and then became a Democrat.

Local legend has it that he made the change after coming under the influence of his fiancée, Ellen Parker, a member of the Democratic State Committee and a diehard Democrat.

Some local Republicans speak of Parker as if she is the Yoko Ono of local politics, breaking up what had been a merry band of Republicans by putting Bowles under her sway, just as Ono allegedly did to Beatle John Lennon.

Both Bowles and Parker laugh at the notion.

"It's just not true," she said.

Bowles said he was moving away from the Republican Party before developing a relationship with Parker.

He said even when he was chairman of the Attleboro Republican City Committee, he was uneasy with some of the tougher planks in the party platform.

He remembered the harsh rhetoric about welfare cheats during the reform debate under former Gov. Bill Weld.

At the time, he had just met a single mother of two who was on welfare, but undergoing job training so she could support her family. He said the mother needed support, not sniping.

Parker, he said, showed him that not all Democrats are "far left-wing whackos," but she did not cause him to change parties.

The couple met while on opposing sides of the 1990 race, with Parker campaigning against Bowles and for her friend, then-state Rep. Stephen Karol. Their relationship developed years later.

Parker said since that time, she and Bowles have had plenty of political disagreements, and Bowles makes his own decisions.

"He has his own mind. We debate plenty in the car," she said.

While improving relations in Attleboro is one goal, establishing them at the Statehouse is another, Bowles said.

He said that when he becomes the city's representative at the Statehouse, it will be

in the city's interest for him and other city officials to work collectively to get things done.

When it comes to his colleagues in the House, he said there will be a need to balance his independent streak with the reality that to be successful on Beacon Hill, one has to be a "team player."

Bowles said he wants to be as cooperative with the legislative leadership as possible, while still being true to himself, his principles and the needs of his district.

"I want to vote my conscience and make sure Attleboro gets the best representation possible, but also make sure we operate in a team environment while not selling my soul," he said.

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