

# Orange councilman faces revived claims

By John Zucal  
Managing Editor

Allegations have resurfaced against an Orange city councilman which, if proved, could lead to his removal from the body.

During a council meeting Jan. 17, a speaker during the public portion claimed West Ward Councilman Hassan Abdul-Rasheed had been convicted of felonies in 1975 and 1995. The alleged convictions reportedly occurred under a birth name.

The speaker, Stephanie Blaine, used as reference a 2006 letter sent by an attorney for former West Ward Councilwoman Maria Vandermeer, whom Abdul-Rasheed narrowly defeated in the municipal election. In the letter to City Clerk Dwight Mitchell, the attorney sought to speak with him regarding claims Abdul-Rasheed had been convicted of felonies.

The letter followed a judge's rejection, on probable-cause grounds, of Vandermeer's request to have Abdul-Rasheed removed.

Blaine said Monday she got the letter through a request she made under the state's Open Public Records Act. She provided the *Record-Transcript* with a copy. Blaine also is a potential candidate

for one of three at-large positions available in the May 8 election.

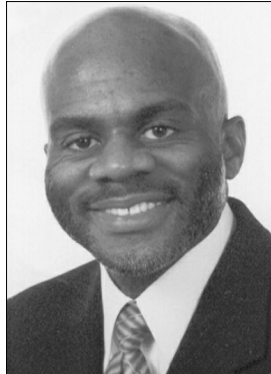
"As I was going out with my petitions, people were asking me if it was true, if the councilman had a record," said Blaine. "When you hear a crazy rumor the first time, you shake it off. When you hear it more and more, you wonder if there's anything to it."

Prior to a City Hall interview on an unrelated subject last week, Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. said his office had forwarded the letter and other documents to the Essex County Prosecutor's and state Attorney General's offices.

"It would be their function to determine if his convictions prevent him from holding public office," said Hawkins. "This new information is disconcerting. I commend the resident for doing the research and not making baseless claims."

Blaine said she provided Hawkins with a copy of the letter as well as election statements, signed by Abdul-Rasheed, in which he affirmed had never been convicted of a "crime or offense involving moral turpitude."

Hawkins' father, Eldridge Sr., represented Abdul-Rasheed during Vandermeer's 2006 court hearings.



Orange Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr., right, has forwarded a 2006 letter, which alleges that City Councilman Hassan Abdul-Rasheed, left, had been convicted of felonies prior to becoming a council member, to the Essex County Prosecutor's and state Attorney General's offices.

Because of the earlier rulings, said Abdul-Rasheed, he believed the issue was resolved.

"I don't have to defend myself against any allegations," said Abdul-Rasheed. "It was adjudicated; they needed probable cause; they couldn't go searching for information against me."

Abdul-Rasheed said Tuesday night he believed the actions of

Blaine and Hawkins were part of a "conspiracy" to remove him from his position.

"I believe it has to be a conspiracy with the mayor, Marvin Braker, Maria Vandermeer, Stephanie Blaine and Stephanie Gidgbi to get me out," said Abdul-Rasheed. Braker is the city attorney; Gidgbi is Hawkins' chief of staff. Braker, Vandermeer and Gidgbi could not

be contacted for responses due to deadline constraints.

Though he has two years remaining in his second term, Abdul-Rasheed is among the candidates for an at-large position. He said he was seeking a seat because "I want to represent the whole city." He added his candidacy also has exposed what he said was an attempt by Hawkins "to try to confuse the city."

Blaine, Vandermeer and Gidgbi have received petitions and are attempting to gain positions on the ballot. Gidgbi receiving petitions, said Abdul-Rasheed, was troubling.

"Why is your chief of staff, who's making \$67,000, running for a \$15,000 position," Abdul-Rasheed asked. "You would think she's running with the consent of the mayor."

Abdul-Rasheed also warned candidates he would seek to have the 2006 ruling upheld if he is challenged based on the allegations in the letter.

"If you want to take me to court, then let's go to court, then I'll charge you for violating my rights," said Abdul-Rasheed. "I think this shows the mayor believes I'm a threat."