

ORANGE GAINS ONE JUDGE BUT LOSES ANOTHER

BY WALTER ELLIOTT

ORANGE : City elders had just finished a four-month process in selecting a chief municipal judge April 19 when they learned that they will have to restart the process again when the second judge announced his resignation the same night. The City Council approved Mayor Eldridge Hawkins, Jr.'s search committee recommendation of Sybil M. Elias, Esq. for Orange's Chief Municipal Judge on a 5-1-1 split vote at about 11:10 p.m. April 19. Those who stayed until the council's 11:30 p.m. adjournment promptly congratulated Elias, of Newark, on their way out of the City Hall Council Chamber.

Hawkins swore in Elias the next day - in time to preside over a Wednesday night docket of cases. The former East Orange and Irvington Municipal Judge has succeeded predecessor the Hon. Eric S. Pennington, PJMC, who resigned after 10 years on Orange's bench Jan. 7.

Hawkins, with Elias into her third day on the bench at the Freddie Polhill Law and Justice Center April 26, praised the screening committee he had convened some 13 weeks earlier.

That committee - consisting of himself, City Attorney Marvin T. Braker, Business Administrator John Mason and Police Capt. Kevin Sooy - considered 15 candidates in interviews before recommending Elias.

"Our committee searched for a new Chief Judge who would be experienced and excellent as a judge, fair and tough on crime and criminals," said Hawkins. "Judge Sybil Elias best met those criteria."

Braker, in his report declared that Elias has a "clear and cogent plan on how to enhance and develop our court.

"Her awareness of the problems facing our city, her sensitivity to people and her clear understanding of where our court needs to be as it moves into the future are exceptional," concluded Braker, who also Irvington Township Attorney.

"Local Talk" readers may remember Elias' coordination efforts in gathering local supplies and donations to Haiti in the wake of the Jan. 15, 2010 earthquake. She has been an East Orange Municipal Judge since 2003, a visiting Newark judge since 2005 and was on Irvington's bench 2005-09.

Elias, in her resume, has

a B.A. degree in political science from Rutgers University, New Brunswick since 1994. She has a 1997 Juris Doctorate from George Washington Law School, Washington, D.C. plus a certification in international human rights law from England's Oxford University.

Elias was law clerkship includes time with the Hons. Irvin B. Booker, Harold W. Fullilove and Donald S. Goldman - all now-retired State Superior Court-Newark judges. She was also an Essex County Assistant Prosecutor.

Orange's chief municipal judge usually holds court Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The post, like most throughout New Jersey, is part-time. Elias has a private practice in Newark since 2002. For all her experience, however, it is hoped that Elias will not get sick or otherwise ask for a day off for at least the next four months.

Four months is how long it took for Hawkins' committee to fill Pennington's vacancy in Elias. Pennington's duties fell on JMC Theodore N. Stephens, II - or on a designated visiting or substitute judge.

Stephens, who also has a private practice in

Maplewood, presented his resignation letter to the City Council April 19. Stephens is running to succeed Superior Court Judge Joseph P. Brennan, Jr. in the Essex County Surrogate. Voters will have a first selection on who will be county surrogate in the June 7 primary and a final selection in the Nov. 8 General Election. Stephens cited his surrogate candidacy in resigning.

Pennington started the chain of events by tendering his resignation to Hawkins Jan. 3. He had served as Orange's chief judge since his January 2000 appointment by Mayor Mims Hackett with City Council approval.

Pennington has had a practice specializing in discrimination and civil rights law in downtown Newark. He has also been on the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey Board of Trustees since 2007, serving part of the time as Vice Chairman.

As late as Feb. 9, 2010, he was a part-time legal counsel to the Newark-based Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission.

Pennington had worked in Gibbons LLC 1995-97 prior to putting out his own shingle. His law clerk experience included working

with the late New Jersey State Supreme Court Justice Hon. Robert N. Wilentz.

Pennington, who was accepted into the state bar association in 1992, received his Juris Doctorate from Rutgers Law School-Newark.

Hawkins, in a Jan. 3, press release, said that Pennington wanted "to pursue other opportunities."

It is not known whether Hawkins' committee will rescreen the other 14 candidates or start anew. The mayor had stressed a first call for Orange residents who have five years' legal experience to apply by Jan. 15.

It is also not known whether Stephens' resignation will hamper the mayor's task force that is reviewing the Orange Municipal Court's condition and effectiveness.

Five members of the council approved Elias' appointment. Council President/West Ward Councilman Hassan Abdul-Rasheed was the sole dissenter. Council Vice President/South Ward Councilman Edward Marable, Jr. himself a practicing attorney, abstained.

The council had interviewed Elias in a closed door session prior to their April 5 meetings.

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