

With 11,000 mail-ins tallied, Atlantic County Republican freeholder seat likely safe

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Nearly two days after Election Day polls closed, the county GOP is now confident it will keep control of the freeholder board.

Republican Freeholder Frank Formica initially feared the seat he has held since 2012 could go to South Jersey businesswoman Celeste Fernandez, despite having a comfortable lead Tuesday night.

Both campaigns believed mail-in ballots could push Fernandez over the edge to victory.

An unofficial tally Thursday morning had Formica, owner of Formicas Bros. Bakery in Atlantic City, with 52 percent of the vote and Fernandez with 47 percent. Formica led by 3,600 votes, but thousands of vote-by-mail ballots had yet to be counted.

With a majority of those now tallied, Formica remains solidly in the lead.

He received 4,809 mail-in votes and Fernandez had 6,336 as of 8 p.m. on Election Night, according to the county Board of Elections. There are still about 3,000 provisional votes and an unknown number of mail-ins that will likely be counted next Tuesday.

Keith Davis, head of the Atlantic County GOP,

"If it's not a huge spike in mail-ins, then we're reasonably confident Formica is expected to win," Davis said.

Alarm bells started ringing for Republicans Tuesday night as results were rolling in. Formica said he heard rumors that former Atlantic City Democratic Councilman Craig Callaway had orchestrated about 3,000 or 4,000 mail-in votes against him, calling it a "weapon of political mass destruction."

Callaway has previously organized messenger and mail-in ballot efforts in the city. Former Republican Atlantic City Mayor Don Guardian blamed Callaway in November 2017 for his failed re-election campaign, claiming Callaway paid for messengers to obtain ballots that were then filled out for Democrats.

Callaway, reached by phone Tuesday night, did not confirm or deny he told Formica about thousands of mail-in votes but said he was confident Democrats would succeed.

"Wait till the numbers come out," Callaway said. "I think that (Formica) is going to lose. This is a great day for the Democratic Party."

At the Claridge Hotel in Atlantic City, Fernandez was confident and upbeat when she took the stage before U.S. Rep.-elect Jeff Van Drew gave his victory speech.

Atlantic County saw a spike in mail-in ballots issued in this election. About 11,000 votes have been received so far, said Board of Elections Clerk Susan Sandman. That's almost double the 5,722 votes cast by mail in the 2014 midterm election.

Democratic freeholder candidates Maureen Leidy and Barbara Butterhof-Rheault were unable to unseat Republicans Maureen Kern and James Bertino, respectively. Butterhof-Rheault, running for the District 5 seat, had 41 percent of the vote against Bertino. Leidy captured 42 percent of the vote against Kern in District 2.

The Democrats tried to build off successes last year when they picked up two seats on the board, ousting Republicans Tony DiPietro and John Carman.

Voters should know definitively whether Formica's seat is safe by next Tuesday when all provisional ballots are tallied, said Evelyn Caterson, commissioner of the county Board of Elections.

The counting process is different this year due to a new New Jersey law that allows mail-in votes to be counted if postmarked by Tuesday and received 48 hours after polls close.

"We've never had mail-in ballots come in the days after the election, so this is all new," Caterson said. "We have no idea how many will come in. We literally don't know."