

Democrat DuWayne Gregory endorses Republican candidate for DA; latest in political saga in Democratic party Free Access

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By Carolyn James



Ray Tierney, Republican candidate for District Attorney who received endorsement from local Democrat this week.

Babylon Town Councilman DuWayne Gregory announced last week that he is endorsing the Republican candidate for District Attorney, Ray Tierney.

"He has great experience, brings an outside perspective and has impeccable integrity," said Gregory, a Democrat. "For more than 26 years, he has been a prosecutor with a strong record of convictions on violent street gangs including MS-13 cases, political corruption and sexual abuse. He has walked the walk in every courthouse. He is a breath of fresh air, and he is what we need."

Gregory acknowledged, however, that the endorsement involves more than just his belief in Tierney's credentials. His support for the Republican is undoubtedly linked to a series of blistering political run ins, investigations and lawsuits over the past several years between Gregory, who was at the time a S.C. a Legislator serving as the legislature's Presiding Officer, District Attorney Tim Sini, a Democrat, and S.C. Exec. Steve Bellone.

In 2015, when Gregory was being tapped to become the legislature's presiding officer, the first African American ever to serve in the post, he did not receive Bellone's support and sources recalled efforts to challenge Gregory's residency and oust him from the legislature. But that failed, and Gregory served as Presiding Officer until he stepped down from the legislature to become a Babylon Town Councilman in January of this year.

In the interim, however, Gregory caused a political dust up of his own. As the county was preparing to appoint Sgt. Salvatore Gigante, the nephew of the S.C. Police Chief of Detectives Gerard Gigante, to the DA's Police Detective Squad, Gregory worked behind the scenes to block the appointment. Gigante had the support of Sini, Bellone and S.C. Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart, but Gregory supported another candidate, Sgt. Jeff Walker, who is black and who had 25 years on the S.C. Police, saying the appointment of Gigante amounted to a case nepotism. He came out publicly charging that there was a "lack of integrity" in Sini's office.

"I went to some of the federal agencies in 2019 and exposed some of the political corruption involved in the DA's office," said Gregory who was presiding officer of the S.C. Legislature at the time. "Since then, nothing has changed."

At one point during the political scuffling, Gregory made statements alleging that Chief Gigante had improperly interceded on his nephew's behalf with legislators, including at the time Presiding Officer Robert Calaraco. Calaraco refuted Gregory's charge and eventually Gregory acknowledged that his claim was based on a "wrong assumption on my part," and apologized.

However, in June of 2019, the legislature received a 9-page report by its outside counsel stating that Gigante had the least amount of experience of five applicants who had applied for the position, a fact that Hart countered, saying that Gigante met the parameters of an additional existing order that placed him ahead of the other candidates for the position.

Also discounting the report was S.C. Exec. Steve Bellone, whose spokesperson told Newsday at the time, that the findings were from a "leaked report" from a confidential whistleblower and that Gregory "should have recused himself from the investigation."

Eventually, the legislature, in a vote of 9 to 7, failed to bring forward the number of votes needed to provide Sgt. Gigante with the nepotism waiver required for the move. That, in turn, was followed by a lawsuit filed Sgt. Gigante against the legislature seeking to overturn the vote on the basis that it was "steeped with extraordinary improprieties." That lawsuit is pending.

"What he (Gregory) did was definitely over the top," said a former legislator in discussing Gregory's fight against the Gigante appointment. "It really got ugly."

Sitting on the sidelines, with one foot in each camp, is Babylon Town Supervisor and Suffolk Democratic Chair Richard Schaffer, who supported Gigante's appointment but who, nonetheless tapped Gregory for the council seat in Babylon almost two years later.

"My way of operating as party chair is that there is no way I will abuse my position by forcing my feelings or the party's feelings on any person involved in the party," said Schaffer when asked about Gregory's decision to support the Republican candidate for District Attorney. "Everyone is their own person; everyone has the right to make their own decision even if I don't agree with it. Tim (Sini) would be the first person to agree with me that a party chair should not use 'undue influence' on any party officials. If I had a conversation with Tim, I am sure he would not want me to do anything in my position to change DuWayne's mind or say something negative based on the fact that he endorsed Ray (Tierney)".

Supporting his decision, Gregory said: "As a Town Councilman, I have the unique perspective of being a former S.C. legislator and a leader of the legislature who worked with some individuals in a way that most people have not," said Gregory this week. "I never felt that Sini was the right person for the job. I continue to have questions about how the office is run, the ethics there and issues of political retaliation. Now I have the opportunity to express that and do my part."

Jesse Garcia, chairman of the S.C. GOP agreed. "In his capacity as Presiding Officer, DuWayne Gregory had an insider's view and was able to look under the hood of department's like the DA's office," said Garcia. "I believe it is because he saw the inner workings of the DA's office and the problems there in training, integrity and transparency that he took this bold and courageous step."

Tierney, an independent, received the Republican and Conservative endorsement in March. He is a resident of Holtsville, was an assistant U.S. Attorney and prosecuted corruption cases against former N.C. Exec. Edward Mangano and his wife Linda, and former Oyster Bay Supervisor John Venditto, who was acquitted of all charges. He also prosecuted MS-13 gang members and helped prosecute former Suffolk Conservative Party leader Edward Walsh in 2016. A graduate of Brown and St. John's universities, he worked as an assistant S.C. district attorney from 1992 to 1999.

"I am proud and honored to have Councilman Gregory's endorsement and support for my campaign," said Tierney. "Councilman Gregory, a veteran, has a long history of serving the people of our County with honor and distinction in the Legislature and in Babylon Town...I want to take politics out of the Suffolk County District Attorney's office and truly serve the people, all of the people, whether Democrat or Republican, of our great County."