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In Forks Twp., tax collector election cometh

3 plan to run for thankless position

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Whispers of discontent among residents of Forks Township have spurred a crowded race for one of the most unpopular political positions: tax collector.

Few people pine each year to hand over their money to the township -- or to be the one who comes calling -- but residents say the process has been more painful than usual under the direction of incumbent Republican June Vail.

Their complaints to township officials, and a growing frustration in the community, are the thrust behind two new candidacies for the low-paying, arguably antiquated and often thankless job.

"We're going to make it the next hot thing," said Wendy Buchanan, one of three local women vying for the slot. "You just wait and see. We'll make it popular."

The ominous title of "tax collector" goes to the person who each year tracks down residents' real estate taxes for the township and the Easton Area School District. Elected collectors follow only limited state guidelines, and otherwise set their own hours and operate as they wish.

But residents complain, according to township officials, that Vail does not return their calls or deposit their checks in a timely manner. In 2005, she sent no interim tax bills to homeowners, leaving the township scrambling for \$70,000 at the end of the year, said Jim Farley, township finance manager.

"I expect a certain level of professionalism and performance from my staff, and I'm not seeing that with the tax collector," Farley said.

As an elected official, however, Vail is accountable only to voters. She edged her challenger in 2003 to finish an unexpired term, and cruised to victory unopposed in 2005.

Vail vows another run this year, saying she has received only one complaint, six years ago, because the township's computer system delayed some deposits. She called the other allegations hurtful, political and untrue.

"I've gotten along with everyone and I've had no problems," Vail said. "Out of 14,000 residents, if there are one or two complaints, that's a very small percentage. I've gotten no complaints."

But Buchanan, a Democrat and 17-year Forks resident, said criticisms of Vail prompted her run for the job. She wants to make the office more efficient, she said, and make the process more pleasant.

"There's always going to be complaints," said Buchanan, recently laid off from AT&T. "But I'm trying to figure out just how bad it is right now and how to make it better."

Republican Anne Bennett-Morse, an assistant earned income tax collector employed by the township, will square off against Vail in the primary. She declined to talk about Vail's performance, instead saying she planned to run on the "friendly, courteous, at-your-service ticket."

If either of the two challengers get the nod, they can thank Vail for their salary each year. She sued the township shortly after her election in 2003, calling the annual \$850 "laughable."

The two sides settled a year later. Supervisors set a flat salary of \$15,000 in 2005, and raised the rate to \$16,500 this year. But the job requires a lot of time for that little amount of money, Vail said, something her opponents fail to realize.

"It's a lot of responsibility and it's a lot of work," Vail said. "I do my job and I do it to the best of my ability."

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