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Politico: Without bosses' blessing, Lonegan marches on

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4



By Elizabeth Titus, *originally published on [PoliticoPro](#)*

Nevermind that the South Jersey Republican establishment is lining up against Steve Lonegan; he didn't close on a local house until January; and none of his past bids for House, Senate or governor have worked out.

Lonegan is pressing ahead in his quest for the Garden State's competitive 3rd District seat anyway — and given his fundraising network, email list and name recognition, nobody can really blame him.

The outspoken conservative's campaign sets the stage for a showdown with businessman Tom MacArthur in the June 3 primary — an all-too-familiar theme for Republicans over the past two election cycles — and it adds a layer of uncertainty in the fall general election tossup against Democrats.

Republicans outside of Lonegan's camp say MacArthur has traditional advantages that are likely to carry him through the primary — especially the powerful endorsements of the district's two county GOP committees — but no one is ruling out Lonegan yet.

"If there were ever the potential for an upset, this is it," said Matt Rooney, a lawyer who writes the conservative blog Save Jersey.

Outsiders probably best remember Lonegan for his provocative Senate bid against Democrat Cory Booker last year.

Lonegan lost statewide by 11 percentage points, but he carried the battleground 3rd District.

Lonegan, the former state director of Americans for Prosperity, re-emerged this year to run for the House seat being vacated by GOP Rep. Jon Runyan. He took some flak from state Republicans, and his biggest roadblock went up last month when the Burlington and Ocean County committees chose MacArthur, giving him a better spot on the ballot known as “the lines” and sending other candidates packing.

Lonegan didn't budge.

“I'm not going to sit back,” he said in a recent phone interview. “I'm going to go to my people, who are the grassroots, who are the primary voters, the volunteers.”

That leaves Republicans to size up both hopefuls. Both are former mayors. Neither is expected to have trouble raising money: MacArthur's campaign said the former insurance executive plans to partially self-fund, like Lonegan did last year. And like Lonegan, MacArthur only moved into the district recently, amounting to mutual disarmament of any carpetbagger attacks.

The Republican primary winner is likely to face Democratic candidate Aimee Belgard, a Burlington County freeholder who was endorsed by EMILY's List and recently named to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's Red to Blue program. Her campaign manager, Hannah Ledford, said in an email that “it'll be interesting to see which radical carpetbagger the far right decides to nominate — we're looking forward to running against either one of them.”

The Republicans' operations each have some overlap with Gov. Chris Christie's world.

Managing MacArthur's effort is Frank Luna, a former campaign and gubernatorial aide to Christie who has also worked for the state party and the Ocean County GOP. MacArthur and Christie share a pollster in National Research's Adam Geller. His digital firm, Prosper Group, made Christie's reelection website.

Also involved is ad-maker Chris Mottola. He and consultant Chris Russell, who is doing mail for the campaign and provided the roster, worked on Runyan's two campaigns.

Lonegan has gotten some of his Senate campaign gang back together, including current manager Chris Santora and finance director Gretchen Hahn. He hired Jamestown Associates as a consultant, Santora said. The [lightning-rod](#) GOP firm, which the National Republican Congressional Committee blacklisted last year, worked on Christie's gubernatorial campaigns.

Lonegan's treasurer, Liz Curtis, is a Runyan campaign alum. Arthur Finkelstein, a longtime operative who's worked for the likes of former New York Gov. George Pataki and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is an adviser, Lonegan and Santora said.

Rick Shaftan, the adviser Lonegan dismissed during the Senate campaign after he gave a profane interview to “Talking Points Memo” deriding Booker, has not returned, Lonegan and Santora said.

Public polling favors Lonegan thus far. He drew 41 percent to MacArthur's 2 percent, with then-contender Mo Hill taking 11 percent, in a survey commissioned by the blog PolitickerNJ last month, before the county endorsements.

MacArthur's campaign writes the polling off as a function of Lonegan's leftover name recognition from past campaigns.

His supporters point to what they see as Lonegan's liabilities, illustrating differences between the candidates on several locally important issues. Lonegan opposed the federal aid package for Superstorm Sandy, calling for a smaller and more accountable plan in the devastated region instead. Lonegan also decried the country's “bloated” military budget during his Senate run, which MacArthur says is a blow to the local joint military base and to the nation's safety.

Lonegan also has a reputation for being rough around the edges, even for New Jersey.

“What Tom is, he’s more of a compassionate conservative,” said Burlington County Republican Chairman Bill Layton. “He’s reasonable and constructive and you can talk to him.”

(Layton noted that MacArthur has won a tea party endorsement, from the area Independence Hall Tea Party PAC. Lonegan once called that group “bitter, washed-up people” who “belong in Pennsylvania.”)

Still, “we’re taking the primary seriously,” Russell said in an email, and MacArthur has begun introducing himself in mailings and on cable TV.

“Tom MacArthur is going to have \$5 million in this election,” Layton said. “The lines of both counties make it pretty formidable, and that’s a lot of money that helps to build name ID.”

Lonegan began airing his first TV ad in early April, aiming straight at MacArthur with an attack about his “liberal” record and property taxes.

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Though the seat is GOP-held, President Obama carried it in 2008 and 2012.

MacArthur got another boost when he reached “On the Radar” status in the NRCC’s “Young Guns” program recently — not an endorsement, but a signal of “potential” in the eyes of the national apparatus.

“We are confident that the voters of the 3rd District will continue to elect an independent minded Republican representative as opposed to a Nancy Pelosi rubber stamp and Obamacare apologist like Aimee Belgard,” said NRCC spokesman Ian Prior in a statement that mentioned neither GOP hopeful by name.

Lonegan is not currently in the program. “This is a local race,” he said. “The NRCC can only do so much.”

There is also a question of whether Christie will get involved directly. Few people expect him to make a primary endorsement, and privately there is some disagreement about how helpful he would be.

“I don’t think anybody would want the governor’s endorsement right now with everything going on,” said a Trenton Republican insider, referring to the so-called Bridgegate traffic scandal that shook Christie’s administration in January.

A Christie ally said that internal polling shows Christie is popular among district Republicans and that “both major candidates have indicated they would like the governor’s support, but it is not clear if he will get involved in the primary.”

Christie has been both friend and foe to Lonegan, defeating him in the 2009 gubernatorial primary, then endorsing him for Senate and helping him pay off that campaign’s debt last year.

“He has his own issues to deal with right now, obviously, and I think he needs to focus on that,” said Lonegan, who defended Christie after the traffic scandal broke.

MacArthur’s camp also expressed their support for Christie.

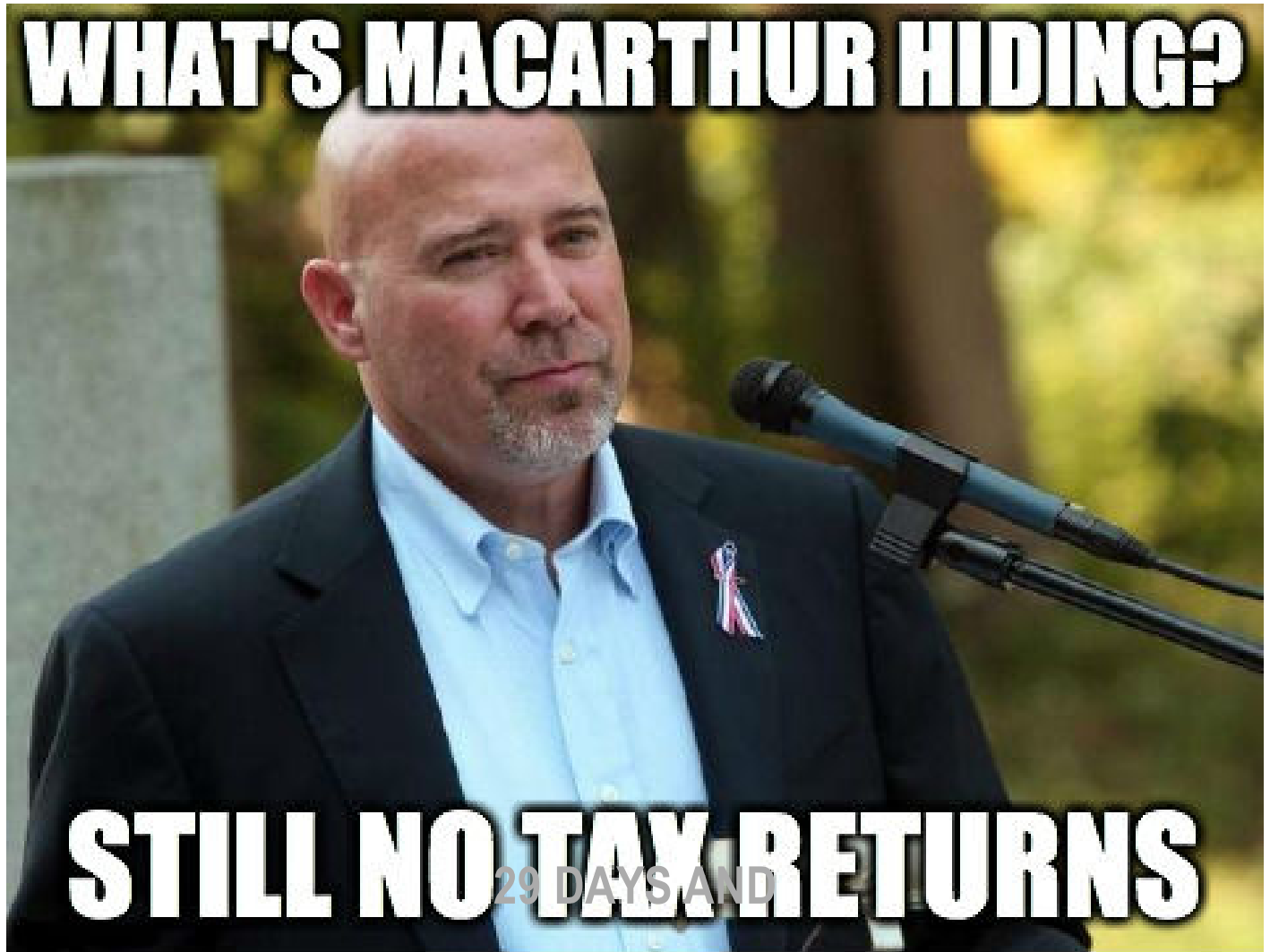
“Tom is seeking, first and foremost, the votes of Republicans in the 3rd congressional District in the June Primary,” Russell said in an email, adding that “Tom is a strong supporter of the Governor.”

The candidates’ first fundraising reports of the year are due April 15, but for now, perhaps the most important thing to watch is how MacArthur starts to introduce and contrast himself with his irascible opponent.

For Lonegan's part, he says he doesn't plan to change last year's playbook much. What did he learn running against Booker?

"I just had lots of good practice in learning about how to articulate my message," he said.

What's MacArthur hiding?



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