

Montgomery unions willingly take credit for Duchy Trachtenberg's defeat

By [Michael Laris](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Rife with images of a ferocious blaze being doused by firefighters and police cruisers on the ready in a Montgomery County neighborhood, the leaflet, filled with ominous warnings, arrived in mailboxes in the midst of a crowded campaign for County Council.

The mailer was funded by Montgomery's police, fire and general government employee unions, whose pay and benefits packages will be voted on by the council's next members. It declared that budget cuts driven by politicians "compromised public safety" by spreading firefighting equipment and personnel "dangerously thin."

"Do County residents really want fewer Police Officers on the street?" it asked. "Do the residents of Leisure World, or Hillandale, or Langley Park, or Hyattstown care if it takes a few minutes longer to get EMS units and fire equipment to their neighborhoods?"

Although it did not use her name, the warnings were meant, in part, to undercut the campaign of Duchy Trachtenberg. She was conspicuously left off the list of candidates deemed to be "Champions of Public Service."

That mailer was among the more subtle attacks on Trachtenberg. Years before, public employees had branded her a "contract buster" and put her face on a "Wanted" poster. They also demonstrated outside her campaign kickoff this year.

On Wednesday, Trachtenberg conceded defeat to newcomer and "Champion of Public Service" designee Hans Riemer, a youth vote and political organizer from Silver Spring. He came in second in countywide vote totals, ensuring him a spot as one four at-large Democrats headed for November. "It's a resounding win," Riemer said.

Trachtenberg blamed the county's public employee unions for running a sustained and effective campaign to push her from office.

Union representatives agreed.

"It was the Unions that put Duchy in office n it was the Unions that took her out. Justice served!" read a text message forwarded at 1:24 a.m. Wednesday by John Sparks, head of Montgomery's firefighters union.

Trachtenberg netted support from public employee unions four years ago but later challenged what she considers unsustainable compensation packages. The cost of government salaries and benefits have soared over the past decade in Montgomery and are a key driver of ongoing budget problems in the wealthy county.

Trachtenberg, head of the council's management and fiscal policy committee, said low voter turnout overall gave an opening to the public employee unions, which she termed highly motivated "special interests."

"I'm not somebody they wanted to see returned to office," Trachtenberg said. "I wasn't just targeted in the last few weeks. It's over two years that I've been targeted by these people, and they've been relentless." Trachtenberg said her critics handed out the public safety leaflet at Metro stations as well.

Trachtenberg's critics had begun pushing accusations months ago that she was responsible for irregularities while working as treasurer of the Maryland chapter of the National Organization for Women, before she was in public office.

"Our understanding is she was the subject of a complaint about bookkeeping irregularities of some sort, not involving any allegation of misuse of funds" but rather of "not keeping the accounts straight," said Joseph Sandler, a District-based campaign and election lawyer who has worked on Democratic causes. Trachtenberg was told nothing about the complaint at the time, and it was subsequently investigated and resolved within NOW, Sandler said. She was not sanctioned by the group, he said. Trachtenberg said the complaint was politically motivated and baseless.

The matter was seized on by her sharpest opponents, including a Montgomery group opposed to a transgender anti-discrimination law sponsored by Trachtenberg and passed by the council. "We had shopped it around to a lot of people," said Ruth Jacobs, a member of the group.

In the days leading up to Tuesday's vote, Montgomery's police union seized on the issue, and sent a letter to Attorney General Douglas Gansler seeking an investigation.

"It was out there. Duchy was saying that she's a key player in the county's budget process," said Montgomery police union official Walt Bader. He said there has been no response from Gansler.

Sandler called the move by the police union "a political stunt. It's par for the course. . . . It's not a serious accusation of any violation of any law."

Responded Bader: "I think it's more about accountability and transparency."

Bader added that he is pleased with the election result. He accused Trachtenberg of pursuing a strategy of creating "the big bad county workers."

"Duchy beat herself. She tries to vilify and demonize, and that's not the way you win an election," Bader said.

But Trachtenberg said her union foes can't handle being challenged.

"That's just them reacting to the fact that a grown-up actually said 'no' to them," she said.
"I said to them, 'We can't afford this.' I don't regret it."