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MARY, QUITE CONTRARY



FILE PHOTO

Mary Sadrakula, at top, speaking inside council chambers Tuesday. Above, Sadrakula protesting Deputy Fire Chief Norman Tahan outside Clifton City Hall in May.

Clifton councilwoman relishes stirring the pot

By DEENA YELLIN
STAFF WRITER

CLIFTON — She was a thorn in the side of city leaders for years, and now that she's been elected to the City Council, Mary Sadrakula is not aiming to forge any tight friendships on the male-dominated governing body.

One of her first orders of business was to propose eliminating council health benefits, among the few perks awarded to Clifton council members. Not surprisingly, her colleagues were not enthused about her initiative.

But Sadrakula said she was determined to make good on her campaign promise to reduce spending and announced that she would go without this particular bonus.

Sadrakula, who owns a multimillion-dollar finance business in Manhattan, also turned down the annual \$4,000 salary awarded to Clifton council members. Cutting out the health care coverage for all would save the town big bucks — up to \$200,000, she estimated.

CLIFTON “We’re asking our [municipal] employees across the board to make concessions because of the difficult economic times we are in,” she said hotly at Tuesday night’s council meeting. Fingering her tortoiseshell glasses, which she took off and put on between her impassioned speeches, she declared, “Do you know of any part-time job in this country that gives medical benefits? Nobody should take this job because they are looking for the benefits. This is a service. We

are looking to give back to the community.”

The councilmen surrounding her frowned and fidgeted. But the newly elected Sadrakula — who is only the fifth woman in Clifton history to take a seat on the panel — is accustomed to stirring up controversy. Long before she was a firebrand on the dais, she was a gadfly known for raising questions, as well as her voice, at public hearings.

Her outspoken personality has earned her some die-hard fans — evidenced by her fourth-place win on election night — not to mention some bitter enemies.

Steve Goldberg, a city activist who worked with Sadrakula on a campaign to

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save Latteri Park, praised her energy and dedication. "I think she brings a lot of ideas and debate, and debate is always good. She has worked hard to save parkland in Clifton," he said, citing her work organizing the defeat of the referendum to build a school at Latteri Park. He added that she also protested the opening of a McDonald's on Allwood Road and helped save Schultheis Farm from being sold off. The council recently agreed to consider her suggestion to bring in City Green, a non-profit organization that would create a children's garden and community garden on that site, he noted.

"She has good ideas and she's passionate about what she believes. She's not afraid to tackle the tough issues," Goldberg said.

As for critics who deride her as a bully, "When a man in politics is assertive, it's considered good, but a woman with the same qualities is considered a shrew," he said.

Critics look for positives

Frank Fusco, a former councilman, painted a different picture. "She's always been against things: Against the school, against the McDonald's, against the health benefits. Let's see what positive role she can bring to the job as a councilwoman."

About her campaign to rid the council of health benefits, Fusco said, "Everything Mary does is about Mary. It wouldn't even have saved that much money for the town. The way she went about it was

wrong — ramming it down [the council members'] throats. That's not the way to have a professional council. She and her band of supporters thrive on friction ... That's not the way the council works best."

Nevertheless, Sadrakula's move to end health benefits was no surprise to Bill Dressel of the New Jersey League of Municipalities. "All costs are being considered these days, including the remuneration of the council," he said. "Every town is reevaluating its costs as part of a larger strategy to reduce costs."

But Clifton's city manager, mayor and council members asserted that the people who serve on the council are already getting too little in return for too much work.

Compared with other cities, Clifton spends far less on council perks, asserted Councilman Matt Ward as he cast his vote against her proposal. "The last salary raise [in 1952] is almost as old as my time on the planet," he said. "We are the sixth-largest city in New Jersey. Passaic is smaller and councilmen get \$25,000. Paterson gives \$39,000 plus longevity. Clifton is on the very low side, compared to the surrounding communities."

Al Greco, city manager, conducted a survey of towns similar in size to Clifton and with a similar city-manager government style. He found Clifton's package lacking. "We've probably got the lowest-paid council among them," he said. For example, in Elizabeth, the mayor earns a salary of \$123,000," said Greco.

Because the health care plan is "pay as you go" and there are no premium costs,



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Clifton Councilwoman Mary Sadrakula was president of the Rosemawr Citizens Association when she opposed a new school on Latteri Park.

eliminating it may save less money than Sadrakula predicts, Greco and others argued.

"We should really examine how much money we'd be saving," said Councilman Peter Eagler, the only other council member besides Sadrakula who has turned down the health benefits. Eagler gets benefits from his job at a state agency. He requested figures for the cost of the council's medical coverage, but the figures were unavailable.

Sadrakula asserted that eliminating the benefit would be in Clifton's interest. She named a few towns, including Upper Cape May and Medford Lakes, that eliminated the benefits. Finally, Tuesday night

she proposed a vote.

Eagler abstained and Councilman Steven Hatala voted in favor of the proposal. Council members Ward, Matthew Grabowski and Joseph Kolodziej, and Mayor James Anzaldi, voted against it – but not before they could speak out against it. Several – including Ward, Anzaldi and Kolodziej – said they felt removing the benefits would effectively bar all but the wealthy from serving.

"If we adopt this, it ensures that only the wealthy can afford to serve the city of Clifton," Kolodziej said. "There are guys out there with a full-time job and a part-time minimum-wage job in order to make ends meet, and he could never serve because if he quit the part-time job to become a councilman, he'd be struggling to make ends meet."

Anzaldi said that "council members put in a lot of hours, energy, time and money into the job. I believe [the health benefits are] something that they deserve."

Defeat not a deterrent

After the votes were tallied and the defeat was a clear 4-2 with one abstention, Sadrakula showed a good poker face to make it clear she wasn't deterred by the rejection. Then she took off her glasses and leaned toward the microphone. "Mayor, I'd like to assemble a committee to look at eliminating sewer fees for residents," she said.

Anzaldi looked taken aback. "You want what?" he asked. She repeated her request and he sighed. Then asked who would be willing to serve on the commit-

tee. Nobody initially was. "How about you, mayor?" Sadrakula asked boldly. The mayor demurred.

After the meeting, she told a reporter she expected her proposal would be shot down. "They are all signed up for the benefits except for Peter and me ... but I was truly disgusted that they made this about my 'wealth,'" she said.

She said she's pleased, nevertheless, by the progress she has made on the council in a short duration.

In her first council meeting, a special forum for unfinished business she requested is now being implemented. "It's frustrating for people to ask the same question over and over and not get feedback," she said. With the forum, "the city manager will be able to answer their questions."

At a work session earlier Tuesday night and at the council meeting later, Sadrakula was at full throttle, interrupting frequently with questions and assertions. She said the search for a chief financial officer should be done by Clifton's director of personnel, rather than an outside personnel company. She asked for a disclaimer sign to be placed in front of publications displayed in City Hall that don't represent the city's point of view. And finally, she suggested the mayor investigate the benefits of installing solar-powered pedestrian crossing signs. Not everything got nods.

"This is politics," said Anzaldi. "Council members can make motions. And we are free to vote against it."

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