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Gloucester County Times

Split the ticket in 3rd Dist.

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Two Democrat Assembly incumbents in the 3rd Legislative District are being challenged by a pair of Republicans who are not running as a team. Voters would be well-served by picking one from each party.

The Times recommends for the two seats re-electing John J. Burzichelli, a four-term Democrat, and electing Robert Villare, a Republican.

Such split representation will make neither Villare nor Burzichelli happy, since they've been more or less running directly against each other. Voters, however, should not hesitate to pair a savvy Democrat veteran with a new GOP candidate who expresses opposing views thoughtfully.

Villare, a surgeon from West Deptford, would be an asset to the Legislature as it copes with coming real-world health care changes in Washington.

Unabashedly conservative, Villare's views are unlikely to dominate the Assembly, no matter how the statewide results go next Tuesday. But anti-tax, anti-big-spending policies aren't given sufficient voice in Trenton, and their loudest advocates often can't be taken seriously.

In contrast, Villare's measured comments, for example, against excessive state school aid for urban "Abbott" districts could influence this debate going forward. Even the Democrats recognize that things had gone too far on that score, with Gov. Jon Corzine leading the charge to tweak the aid formula toward more balance.

Villare says Burzichelli "needs to take a vacation," but we think they can complement each other in Trenton.

Burzichelli touts the ongoing Port of Paulsboro project, which Villare, to some extent, derides. Done properly, however, this project can be an economic engine on a waterfront that has seen significant industrial job losses.

Burzichelli does have some difficulty moving good ideas through both houses. His legislation to better protect homeowner's rights in eminent domain redevelopment cases has languished; lawmakers barely considered some of his methods for funding big-ticket items without relying so much on local property taxes. At least Burzichelli thinks about this stuff coherently, which is more than can be said for some of his Trenton colleagues. As mayor of Paulsboro, he's a dual officeholder, but too competent a lawmaker to remove him for that reason alone.

Burzichelli and Villare are both from a narrow swath of Gloucester County, and this district also includes Salem County and part of Cumberland County. That will tilt some voters toward Burzichelli's Democrat running mate, former Bridgeton councilwoman Celeste M. Riley. She was appointed to the Assembly four months ago, replacing Douglas Fisher, now the state agriculture secretary.

Riley shows genuine interest in solving socio-economic problems that are pronounced in her part of the district, and would provide good constituent service. But Villare is the more dynamic newcomer and deserves a shot.

The other Republican in the race, Lee Lucas of Gibbstown, has been disowned by his own party's leadership. He wears this as a badge of courage, but GOP leaders are right to reject his extreme survival-of-the-fittest views. Voters should, too.