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A.C. MAYOR GILLIAM

Recall effort of Atlantic City mayor 'going to happen,' just not yet

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In 2018, Atlantic City Mayor Frank Gilliam Jr. was accused of improperly depositing a \$10,000 check in his campaign account, got into a fistfight outside a casino and had his home raided by FBI and IRS agents.

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ATLANTIC CITY — Embattled Mayor Frank Gilliam Jr. begins 2019 facing a litany of issues, none of which the city's chief executive has much control over.

Since taking office in January 2018, Gilliam has been at the center of several controversies, including allegations of theft of campaign contributions from his own political party and running mates, his involvement in an early-morning melee outside a casino nightclub in November that resulted in signed complaints of simple assault and harassment, and a raid on his home in December by the FBI and IRS.

On top of all the aforementioned self-inflicted issues, the mayor has limited authority in the city because of the state's continued oversight, which could last until 2021.

And while Gilliam has given no indication he intends to resign, an effort to remove him from office through the ballot box before his four-year term is complete is being considered.

Gilliam did not return calls seeking comment on a potential recall petition.

John Devlin, an Atlantic City Democratic Committee and Board of Education member, said a recall petition is “going to happen” but will likely have to wait until the conclusion of the federal investigation.

“It’s been discussed by the committee at length,” Devlin said.

Carl Golden, a former press secretary for two past New Jersey governors and a senior contributing analyst at Stockton University’s William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, said Gilliam faces a difficult political future.

“He’s going to have a hard time changing the subject,” Golden said of Gilliam. “The video (of the casino nightclub fight) is there forever. The media coverage is something he’s going to have to deal with. But he’s given ammunition to his opponents.”

Following Gilliam’s involvement in a Nov. 11 brawl outside Golden Nugget Atlantic City’s Haven Nightclub — along with Councilman Jeffree Fauntleroy II — the city Democrats voted to denounce the two officials, and the question of a recall was posed to committee leaders.

At the time, Committee Chairwoman Gwen Lewis said the body would not entertain a recall petition until the legal process was complete.

On Dec. 3, federal authorities executed a search warrant on Gilliam’s North Ohio Avenue home, removing several cardboard boxes of evidence and computer equipment. Federal authorities have not disclosed the scope of their investigation, and no charges against Gilliam have been filed.

Devlin said many of the committee members viewed the raid as a classic “where there’s smoke, there’s fire” situation, but are biding their time before starting an expensive and time-consuming recall effort.

“A lot of community leaders and residents are not very happy (with Gilliam),” said Devlin. “The perception is that Atlantic City is in a bad place right now. But we’re going to wait it out until we pull the trigger (on a recall).”

The City Clerk’s Office said a recall petition had not been submitted.

Any petition effort would be done without Craig Callaway, the former City Council president who spent time in prison for bribery but has since re-emerged as a prominent Democratic party operative partially responsible for engineering a handful of political wins in Atlantic City with an aggressive get-out-the-vote and absentee ballot operation. Callaway helped Gilliam defeat former Republican Mayor Don Guardian in 2017 and said he regrets his role in getting the Democrat elected.

“He’s a bad fit for now, he was a bad fit from the beginning,” said Callaway. “But, no, I would not (be involved in a recall effort).”

Marc Pfeiffer, assistant director of Rutgers University’s Bloustein Local Government Research Center, said there is a “good body of work” detailing successful recall efforts in New Jersey. But, he said, the outcome depends on the “motivation of citizens” and attention to detail because the process must be followed strictly.

“It does happen. It’s not out of the ordinary,” he said. “It’s not a (common occurrence), but they’re not so few and far between that it becomes an anomaly.”

New Jersey's Constitution allows for the recall of an elected official after one year of service. Recall proceedings, however, can begin 50 days before the one-year benchmark. Gilliam was sworn into office Jan. 1, 2018.

A recall petition committee, made up of at least three registered voters, must notify election officials, who would then review and either approve or deny the petition. If approved, the petition committee must then obtain signatures from 25 percent of all registered voters in the municipality. The committee has 160 days to obtain the required number of signatures.

In 2018, the number of registered voters in Atlantic City was 22,933, which means a recall petition would require at least 5,733 signatures. Only 8,776 ballots were cast in Atlantic City in November's general election.

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