

Challenge against Plainfield mayoral post nixed

Group had claimed Robinson-Briggs was ineligible to run for seat.

By **CHRISTA SEGALINI**
Staff Writer

Plainfield Mayor Sharon Robinson-Briggs won a major victory Wednesday when a lawsuit filed by a group of Plainfield residents challenging her eligibility to be mayor was dismissed by a Superior Court judge.

The decision, handed down by Judge Thomas Lyons of the Chancery Division of the Superior Court in Elizabeth, was met by applause from



ROBINSON-BRIGGS

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Mayor

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Robinson-Briggs and more than a dozen people who attended the hearing to support her.

"It's unfortunate the lawsuit was brought in the first place, but now she (Robinson-Briggs) can proceed to serve the city of Plainfield without a cloud of suspicion surrounding her," said Angelo Genova of Genova, Burns & Vernoia, the Livingston law firm that represented Plainfield in the case.

"I believe the mayor has been completely vindicated," Genova said.

Hackettstown attorney Joseph Horn, who represented the plaintiffs, could not be reached

for comment.

The complaint, filed May 19 by eight city residents including Plainfield Republican Party Chairwoman Sandy Spector, claimed Robinson-Briggs failed to meet requirements for serving as mayor because she was not a legal voter in the city four years prior to running for the office in 2005 — a requirement set by the city charter.

The plaintiffs' claim is similar to allegations made against Robinson-Briggs in 2003 during her bid for a seat on the Plainfield Board of Education.

In that case, a former school board member challenged Robinson-Briggs' eligibility for the seat, charging she had not met the school board's requirement of being a legal voter in the city for at

least one year prior to the election. Robinson-Briggs eventually won the case.

According to testimony in the school board case, Robinson-Briggs was a resident of Plainfield from April 1993 to July 1998, and then again from late March 2002 to the present. She registered to vote in the city Sept. 20, 2002.

Using Robinson-Briggs' testimony of her residency history, Spector wrote a letter to the Plainfield City Council earlier this year questioning the mayor's eligibility to hold the mayoral seat and requesting her qualifications be verified.

According to court documents, the matter was referred to Union County clerk Joanne Rajoppi, who advised it was the responsibility

of city clerk Laddie Wyatt to determine a candidate's eligibility for the election.

Spector and seven other residents then filed suit against the city, Robinson-Briggs, Rajoppi and Wyatt in May, seeking to remove Robinson-Briggs as mayor and hold a special election for the seat. The group claimed the four years of legal voting status required of each of the city's mayoral candidates was meant to be interpreted as consecutive years held directly before the election.

But Lyons ruled the charter could be interpreted to permit a candidate to run for mayor providing the individual was a legal voter in the city for any four years prior to the election.

In addition, Lyons said the

plaintiffs had missed numerous deadlines to challenge Robinson-Briggs' eligibility, including an April 18, 2005, deadline for objecting to Robinson-Briggs' nominating petition for the June 2005 primary; a June 17, 2005, deadline for challenging the results of the primary election; and a Dec. 8, 2005, deadline for challenging the results of the general election.

Assemblyman Jerry Green, D-Plainfield, said the court challenges against Robinson-Briggs are examples of how political feuds among Plainfield officials are a major distraction from the city's issues and a burden on taxpayers.

"This is the second time this group has tried to embarrass the

mayor. Both times they were wrong, and this case has cost the taxpayer's over \$40,000 (in attorney's fees)," Green said. "I still want to heal the city of Plainfield and bring the city together, but it's time to put the political problems on the sideline."

Robinson-Briggs won the mayoral election in November by a wide margin, defeating former Mayor Albert T. McWilliams. McWilliams, a former Democrat, had switched parties and campaigned as a write-in Republican candidate after the state Supreme Court prevented him from appearing on the ballot.

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