



Raising the bar



The race for auditor is grabbing little attention in this crowded election season, but the office has the potential to wield enormous power. That potential hasn't always been realized in the past. Will this year's race between two candidates both promising to crack down on waste and fraud yield a true watchdog?

BY PAUL MCMORROW

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MANNING

Suzanne Bump's campaign staff is antsy. It's already an hour into the campaign event, a barbeque with Malden Democrats, and their candidate for state auditor is seriously lagging behind schedule. The most frequent inquiry she gets is: "What does the state auditor do, anyway?" This question takes some time to answer. Campaigning for auditor is half political pitch, and half civics lesson.

Bump has been explaining the auditor's job to the same table for 10 minutes now. Her staffers keep shooting her looks, silently urging her to wrap it up and move on to the tables out back. Just as Bump breaks loose, the keyboard

player launches into a spirited version of “The Wheels on the Bus.” A kindergartener has the microphone. The girl crumbles under pressure, forgets half the words, and just mumbles along to the music. Bump stands at attention, nodding along enthusiastically. When the song ends, she takes hold of the microphone and addresses the girl.

“You don’t have any idea what I’m doing here, do you?” she asks. “I’m a politician. I’m running for auditor. Do you know what the auditor does? The auditor makes sure government spends your money honestly. You don’t want your money stolen, do you? You want to get your money’s worth from state services. Does that sound good to you? Does that sound like a winning platform for state auditor? I do, too.”

Bump is pitching a 6-year-old, but she faces many of the same hurdles in explaining her candidacy to citizens of voting age. Few voters Bump or her Republican rival Mary Connaughton meet on the campaign trail know what the auditor does. The race is also toward the bottom of a ballot crowded with contentious contests for governor and Congress. Yet the position wields enormous power. The auditor’s job is to scour the state’s books, everything from public bidding rules to theft controls. It’s a watchdog for all of state government.

Joe DeNucci, who has occupied the auditor’s office for the last 24 years, is retiring. Most biographies of DeNucci lead with his prizefighting bona fides—he was a Golden Gloves champ, a top professional middleweight, and a member of the National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame. But in many ways, DeNucci is as pure a creature of Beacon Hill as there is. He was a legislative page as a teenager, and before winning his first race for auditor in 1986 he spent a decade in the House. Seven governors, and six House speakers, have served since DeNucci first took public office. He has institutional ties that stretch back decades. High-profile members of both parties count him as a friend. Most are loath to criticize him publicly, even as they stress the divide between the office’s potential and its current performance.

DeNucci’s 24-year tenure has been marked by reports that had an impact, and by extended periods of quiet. As he leaves office, he’s being dogged by scandal. He handed a job to a man who had been denied work in the state Probation Department because of nepotism concerns, pocketing campaign donations from the man’s family along the way. The State Ethics Commission recently charged DeNucci with illegally hiring his 75-year-old cousin as a fraud examiner. And he touched off a firestorm of criticism for raising his staff’s wages by 5 percent amid broad state budget cuts; a *Boston Globe* editorial called the raises, awarded after DeNucci had decided against seeking reelection, a “shameless Beacon Hill ritual.”

The pay raises helped catapult a sleepy auditor’s race into the press, and raised some fundamental questions



Suzanne Bump, the Democratic nominee for state auditor, has the backing of the Beacon Hill establishment.

about just what DeNucci’s office was, or wasn’t, doing with its 300 employees and \$15.7 million annual payroll—and what Bump and Connaughton would do with them. The two candidates emphasize the importance of the office as a fiscal watchdog. They both speak about making the auditor a proactive change agent. Their challenge lies in making voters care about the office’s problems and potential.

“The major problem is letting people know who you are, and what you want to do,” says Larry DiCara, a former Boston city councilor and longtime observer of local politics. “The inability to get your message out is extraordinary. My guess is, right now more people know who Philip Markoff is, or Justin Bieber, than Joe DeNucci.”

LINGERING QUESTIONS

The auditor’s office is a statewide constitutional office broadly charged with ferreting out waste, fraud, and corruption in state government. It was created in 1855 as an independent check on the state’s executive branch. The Legislature has gradually handed the office a number of additional functions. It keeps tabs on the state’s information technology infrastructure, and issues commentaries on both the finances and property conditions at local pub-



"If you liked me as a pit bull on the Turnpike, you'll love me in the auditor's office," says Mary Connaughton, the Republican nominee.

lic housing authorities. It determines whether new laws represent unfunded municipal mandates. It investigates fraud in state welfare, food stamp, and health care programs. And the auditor's office has final say over whether

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public contracts run afoul of the anti-privatization Pacheco Law. For those tasks, it commands a relatively sizable bureaucratic force: In 2009, DeNucci's office employed more than 100 more bodies than the office of the state Treasurer. By further comparison, last year the state agency that oversees public employees' health care employed 56 people, while the governor's budget-writing office employed 58.

Every year, the auditor files an annual report to the

governor and the Legislature, highlighting the office's prior fiscal year output. In fiscal year 2009, for instance, DeNucci's office issued 324 audit reports; the year prior, it issued 240 reports, covering 310 state agencies. Lately, though, the great majority of those reports have covered routine, statutorily-required inquiries into IT infrastructure and local housing authorities. Several focused on the need for better cash management systems at district courts, even though a new judicial bookkeeping system is already in development.

DeNucci's office was vigorous in chasing down Big Dig waste and public construction overruns, and recent reports have uncovered costly lapses at the MBTA and at the Division of Unemployment Assistance. But lately, much of the waste, fraud, and abuse the auditor's office has examined has been concentrated in safety net programs. Privately, many on Beacon Hill complain that the office isn't as aggressive as it used to be, and that DeNucci has lost his fastball.

Three recent reports from the auditor's office show where those complaints are coming from. A July 2006 audit of the State Lottery Commission noted that 80 per-

cent of the Lottery's scratch ticket business was being driven through a single firm, Scientific Games International. The audit worried about the impact a disaster at Scientific Games's manufacturing plant could have on Lottery revenues, but did not ask why so much Lottery business was flowing to a single company. The Lottery later faced a lawsuit alleging that state Treasurer Tim Cahill threw business to Scientific Games because the firm was funneling lucrative consulting fees to a close Cahill associate.

A January 2009 audit of the University of Massachusetts School Building Authority noted that the authority had a history of handing out consulting contracts without bidding them competitively. The report also said the authority entered into several consulting relationships without written contracts. The authority responded by saying it had no legal obligation to bid out its consulting work. The audit ran just six pages long, and nothing came of it.

A June 2009 audit examined the Massachusetts Health and Educational Facilities Authority (HEFA). When the report was being written, Gov. Deval Patrick was trying to shoehorn a political supporter into a lucrative job at the lending agency. The gambit revealed that the supporter's prospective job had been vacant for a dozen years, and that HEFA's lending activities overlapped with those of other state agencies. The eight-page audit did not address the staffing controversy, or weigh whether HEFA was a necessary cog in the state bureaucracy. The Legislature folded HEFA into MassDevelopment soon after.

THE PIT BULL BARKS

It's a cool, gray late-summer morning, and Mary Z. Connaughton is in Fitchburg, handing out cookies and serving ice cream to a roomful of senior citizens. She's discussing scooping techniques with the woman next to her. "I was a Brigham's girl way back," Connaughton says. When she finds out the other woman was, too, they trade an enthusiastic high-five. After the two Brigham's girls have finished their duty, and the mountain of cookies have been dispensed—Connaughton's Worcester County coordinator had baked 15 dozen of them the night before—Connaughton does a lap around the room.

She works it like a pro. She shakes hands, explains the auditor's office, drops her literature, and moves on quickly. When addressing the room, she makes quick mention of strained municipal budgets, transportation consolidation, and the state's unfunded pension obligation. She gets just wonky enough to let the seniors know she knows policy, but the thrust of her stump speech is folksy and populist.

"I really believe that auditor is the second most important job in state government," she says. "It's the top public advocate, the top watchdog. The auditor only reports to



State Auditor Joseph DeNucci has held the post for 24 years.

you. I'll be your eyes on Beacon Hill. I'll roll up my sleeves and find out what's going on with our money. I'm not looking out for the special interests. The only people I want to look out for are you."

This is Connaughton's first statewide run. She has only

Connaughton has made only one other bid for public office, running unsuccessfully for state rep in 2004

made one other bid for public office before, running unsuccessfully for state representative as part of Republican Gov. Mitt Romney's disastrous 2004 bid to erode the Legislature's Democratic super-majority. She cleared the path for a statewide run not on Beacon Hill, but in Park

Square, where the state's transportation offices are housed. Romney placed her on the board of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, and she proved to be a devastatingly polarizing weapon in the governor's running battle with the Pike's former chairman, Matthew Amorello. She fought the Turnpike Authority's leadership and used her unpaid seat on the board to attract an unprecedented level of attention to the Pike's finances. Later, she waged a merciless campaign against toll increases on the highway. She did so by aggressively courting the press—in Fitchburg, she ticked off the various print and broadcast outlets the seniors might recall her from. "If you liked me as a pit bull on the Turnpike," she says, "you'll love me in the auditor's office."

To her sympathizers, Connaughton's tenure at the Turnpike shined a light on a bloated, ineffectual government agency; her detractors believed her brawling public persona would wind up fueling a future political run. Patrick's former transportation secretary, James Aloisi, famously denounced her as a distraction and a gadfly.

"She was handpicked to implode the Turnpike Authority," says Jordan Levy, a former Pike board member. "That's why [Romney] appointed her. She asked the tough questions. She was not afraid and she was not bullied by anyone. She was put in there for a reason, and she did her job."

POLICY TALK AND POLITICAL DIGS

Like Connaughton, Bump is a political fighter. She served in the Legislature from 1985 until 1993, spearheading an overhaul of workers compensation. Following that, she worked as a lawyer and lobbyist for the insurance and financial services industries before joining the Patrick administration in 2007 as the secretary of labor and workforce development. Bump left the cabinet post last year to run for the auditor's job.

Bump was heavily outspent in a brutal three-way Democratic primary. She won comfortably by talking up the virtues of good government, while never shying away from elbow-throwing. She pounded Worcester County Sheriff Guy Glodis over a series of ethical and financial scandals, calling him a liar and repeatedly insisting that Glodis didn't deserve an office of public trust. And she openly questioned whether her other primary opponent, Mike Lake, actually understood what the state auditor does.

Nor does she need much prodding to lay into Connaughton. "She has been a critic, but she has never challenged her political establishment," Bump says. One of the central themes of Connaughton's campaign is that the auditor should be a CPA, just as the attorney general should be a lawyer; Connaughton is the only certified public accountant in the auditor's race. "We're not electing

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a chief accountant for the Commonwealth,” Bump responds. “That reflects a narrow, shallow view of the role of the auditor. I intend to take audit reports and create change with them. You don’t do that by being in the field.”

Bump’s 30-second stump speech hits familiar ground—eliminating waste and fraud, and shifting the auditor’s office into a proactive stance. When she expands on that, though, she talks extensively about the nuts and bolts of making government work better. She wants the auditor to examine government systems, instead of just individual state agencies. In her view, the auditor should be more than a check on the excesses of government, and more than a muckraker. She sees the auditor as a nonpartisan figure. In order for Beacon Hill’s bureaucracy to function efficiently, she argues, the auditor needs to be able to extract policy changes from inside the State House.

“Financial accountability is the backbone of the office,” she says, “but I also want to focus on performance auditing, finding out where there’s duplication of effort, where there are turf battles, where there are silos. I want to use audit tools to highlight those things, and then use the political skills I have to make sure those reports don’t just gather dust, but they actually get put into action by the executive branch and the Legislature. The ability to drive change is an important attribute in the next auditor, so you don’t just have a report that sits on the shelf, but ability to be an advocate for change.”

Connaughton also sees a greater advocacy role for the auditor. She wants to file legislation, and believes the auditor should question the cost and revenue projections behind major policy shifts such as casino gambling or transportation consolidation. But in her version, the auditor isn’t working Beacon Hill hearing rooms. Instead, she says, she’d use radio, television, newspapers, and social media to put pressure on lawmakers and the governor. “I’d be extremely aggressive,” she says. “The office’s real power, besides going in and looking at the books, is in the power of the people. I’d be out in the public. On the Turnpike board, I saw how things work when the public is informed, and the media is informed. It makes a huge difference in holding people accountable.”

POWER AND POTENTIAL

Bump and Connaughton have both pledged to elevate the auditor’s office above Beacon Hill’s partisan bickering, but both have political baggage to overcome. Bump has had the backing of the Beacon Hill establishment since the race began, which helped her during the primary but could hurt her if voters are in a mood for change in November. DeNucci endorsed her candidacy before May’s Democratic

convention. She’s in the position of campaigning on her experience in Patrick’s cabinet, even though the governor’s job approval numbers are less than formidable and, depending on how the votes fall in November, she could be in the position of scrutinizing the work of her former boss and colleagues. During their primary fight, one of the nastiest things Glodis thought he could say about Bump was, “She’s the Beacon Hill candidate, and she was serving in the Legislature when I was still in high school.”

Just four men have held the auditor’s office in the past 70 years. None of them has used it as a bully pulpit

Republican Party faithful have repeatedly said that in a state where a solidly Democratic Legislature controls spending, the office of auditor seems ready-made for an aggressive Republican. But that line of reasoning seems at odds with the auditor’s explicit mandate to expose waste, and not settle political scores. In her campaign, Connaughton has appeared to walk both sides of this line. At April’s GOP convention, Connaughton’s speech made the *Boston Globe’s* characterization of her Pike board tenure—“the thorniest thorn in the side of Gov. Deval Patrick”—an applause line; her next line, that she hadn’t meant to be a thorn, failed to excite the crowd.

Even one of her Turnpike board allies, who was himself not unfamiliar with the art of a well-timed grenade toss, says she’ll need a different approach if she’s in charge of an important state office. “If she’s just a bomb-thrower,” Levy says, “she won’t be successful. The office has to change. Anybody can audit. But what do you accomplish?”

Just four men have held the auditor’s office in the past 70 years. None of them has used the position as a bully pulpit from which to launch a run for higher office. And there’s been a longstanding divide between the office’s promise—that of a highly visible, crusading public watchdog—and its reality.

DeNucci replaced John Finnegan, a longtime state legislator and one-term auditor, in 1987. Finnegan replaced Thaddeus Buczko, whom Gov. Ed King appointed to the bench of the Essex probate court. Buczko, a former state legislator, became the Democrats’ pick for auditor when the office’s longtime holder, Thomas Buckley, died the night before the 1964 primary; it’s said the party was less concerned with Buczko’s burning desire to root out waste,

fraud, and corruption in state government, than with his ability to cover two constituencies on the party's ticket, since he was both Polish and from Essex County. And Buckley, whom Buczko replaced in 1964, was first elected in 1940.

Insiders from across the political spectrum are nearly unanimous in their view of the auditor's office: They are loath to criticize DeNucci directly, but they say there is a real need for the office to do far more than it has in the past.

"Most people would be hard-pressed to identify the statutory or constitutional functions of the auditor's office," says House Minority Leader Brad Jones. "This is not necessarily a criticism of what has been done, but more could be done. The office can be a more aggressive check in a state that doesn't have that party balance. At a time of diminished resources, it's more critical than ever."

Former Gov. Paul Cellucci, who was elected to the House in the same year as DeNucci, and counts the auditor as a friend, says the office should play a crucial role on Beacon Hill. "The auditor clearly plays an important role in state government, not only as a watchdog on spending, but in analyzing whether programs are working or not," Cellucci says. "With subpoena power, it's a pretty powerful office."

Former attorney general Scott Harshbarger believes

the auditor's office is up for grabs at a unique time in history. He compares the electorate's current mood to the pessimism that permeated the country in the post-Watergate era. There's one difference, he says: "In the '70s, people believed government could really be reformed with the right systems and the right people. Today, government is believed to be the problem."

The state's independent constitutional offices, Harshbarger argues, were specifically established to perform the sorts of oversight functions that breed good government and public trust. They failed to fulfill that promise the last time the public turned on government—the investigative office of the Inspector General was established in 1981, after the Ward Commission declared public corruption "a way of life in Massachusetts," and the attorney general and auditor were shown to be powerless to stop it. Now, the next auditor will take office with a former House speaker under federal indictment, a former state senator awaiting sentencing on federal corruption charges, and a patronage scandal raging in the state Probation Department.

"The potential for good is huge," Harshbarger says. "It is not inappropriate to ask, what proactive roles could the office take? That's not a criticism of Joe. But what has been done is at least a baseline for what can be done." **CW**



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