

# The NJEA Broke all The Spending Records to **Elect** **Sean Spiller**

**BUT THE NJEA OBSCURES THE TRUTH  
WITH INADEQUATE DISCLOSURE TO ELEC**

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**SUNLIGHT**  
POLICY CENTER  
— OF NEW JERSEY —

## **THE NJEA BROKE ALL THE SPENDING RECORDS TO ELECT SEAN SPILLER**

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#### INTRODUCTION

New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) President/Montclair Mayor Sean Spiller made news earlier this year when he declared that he would be “[fully supportive of moving to an elected Board of Education.](#)” Due to Spiller’s judicially recognized conflict of interest and the reality that the Montclair Education Association (MEA) largely kept Montclair public schools closed this spring, Montclair citizens launched a campaign to reduce Spiller’s massive conflict of interest by changing from a mayor-appointed school board to an elected one. Perhaps Spiller’s words indicate a genuine respect for the will of the people, or perhaps they indicate a supreme confidence in the NJEA’s ability to outspend its opponents in Montclair’s municipal elections. Spiller knows all about the latter: his successful 2020 mayoral run was a telling example that the NJEA can and will outspend anyone to get its favored candidates elected.

Last May, when [Sunlight delved into](#) the NJEA’s support for Spiller’s mayoral candidacy, we used Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) filings to estimate that Spiller had raised \$57,000, of which \$36,000 came from the NJEA and its allies. Having now reviewed updated ELEC filings, Sunlight has a much more comprehensive tally of what Spiller actually raised and spent, and more importantly what was spent on his behalf. We found that we had vastly underestimated the money that was poured into getting Spiller elected. The eye-opening fact is that as much as \$310,000 was spent to elect then-NJEA Vice President Spiller, and as much as \$230,000 (74%) of it came from the NJEA and its allies. The NJEA’s inadequate disclosure to ELEC obscures the true amount, but it is clear that no Montclair municipal election has ever seen this level of spending.

The ELEC data shows that the NJEA was all-in for getting its then-vice president into the Montclair mayor’s office. Montclair was awash in NJEA money and blanketed with professional video ads, waves of mailers and well-funded get-out-the-vote efforts by NJEA-paid political operatives. Montclair citizens need to know the truth behind Spiller’s election: it was bought and paid for by hundreds of thousands of dollars from the NJEA and its allies.

#### HOW MUCH WAS REALLY SPENT IN THE 2020 MONTCLAIR MAYORAL ELECTION

There were three major sources of funds spent on Spiller’s 2020 campaign: his own campaign, the slate he headed, Montclair 2020, and independent expenditures made on his behalf by Garden State Forward, the NJEA’s Super PAC.

## 1. Spiller's Campaign

ELEC data reveals that Spiller's campaign spent a [cumulative total of \\$88,286](#). Spiller's campaign raised a total of \$77,421, and presumably the \$11,000 difference came from funds left over from Spiller's 2016 campaign for town council (also heavily funded by the NJEA).

As expected, the majority of the donations came from the NJEA and its allies. \$20,786 came from donations less than \$300, whose donors are not reported to ELEC. \$55,135 came from donations over \$300, which are reported. Of this amount, \$33,450 came from the NJEA and its allies, or 61% of the total. (See Appendix A for a list of these donors). So the bottom line is that at least \$33,450 in direct donations to the Spiller campaign came from the NJEA and its allies.

## 2. The Montclair 2020 Slate

Spiller headed a slate called Montclair 2020, with Spiller at the top along with town council candidates Russo, Terry, Hurlock, Schlager and Price-Abrams. [Montclair 2020 raised and spent a total of \\$65,960](#).

The majority of this money also came from the NJEA. Of the \$65,960 raised, [\\$41,000, or 62%, came from NJEA PAC](#).

That makes for a total of \$154,246 spent electing Spiller – more than twice the original amount reported by Sunlight - of which at least \$74,450 came from direct donations from the NJEA and its allies.

## 3. Garden State Forward

The NJEA's Super PAC, Garden State Forward, provides the NJEA with the perfect vehicle to spend unlimited amounts money in support of a favored candidate like Spiller. Garden State Forward previously supported Spiller's 2016 run for town council but its 2020 spending took things to an unprecedented level.

In total, Garden State Forward made three independent expenditures for May 2020 municipal elections: two to CerillionN4 Partners, the NJEA's "go-to" outfit for campaign-related mailers, and one to New Jersey Working Families Alliance, a progressive organization and NJEA-ally that the NJEA has previously paid for get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts and which has previously conducted GOTV for Spiller in Montclair.

**CerillionN4 Partners.** Garden State Forward made [two late-April payments for mailers totaling \\$67,110](#). The ELEC filing shows the election date of May 12, 2020 – the date of the Montclair mayoral election – in a "nonpartisan" election, which the mayoral race was. The name of the election district was listed as "statewide," but several factors point to the mailers being tied to Montclair.

- Montclair was the only town where the NJEA made direct donations to candidates in the May 2020 municipal elections.<sup>1</sup>
- [In 2016, Garden State Forward made a \\$16,800 independent expenditure](#) with CerillionN4 Partners for mailers in support of Spiller’s run for Montclair town council, but in this filing, the election district was listed as “Montclair Town.” It turns out that 2016 and 2020 are the only cases where Garden State Forward has made independent expenditures in a New Jersey May municipal election in its history.
- Montclair was the only May municipal election where a NJEA officer and NJEA Political Leadership Academy graduate was running for mayor in a campaign largely funded by the NJEA. The NJEA had a lot at stake in Montclair in May 2020 and apparently not much at stake elsewhere.

**Working Families Alliance.** The same goes for the [\\$89,000 paid to NJEA-ally New Jersey Working Families Alliance](#) for GOTV efforts (“phone calls/text messages” – socially distanced GOTV) for a May 12, 2020, nonpartisan election.

- Like the payment to Cerillion above, the filing shows the election district as “statewide,” but Sunlight could not find any news reports or social media accounts of Working Families GOTV efforts in the other May municipal elections.
- Sunlight could not find any Working Families endorsements or other indications of support for candidates in the May 2020 municipal elections, although they made plenty of endorsements in other elections.
- The NJEA has previously paid Working Families for GOTV. [In the 2019 general election](#), the NJEA paid Working Families \$50,000 for “GOTV/Field/Literature,” which suggests that they were distributing mailers, and Montclair was awash in mailers in April and May 2020.
- There were [reports of precisely this sort of activity by Working Families in Montclair in 2016](#), which described “Working Families Party door-knockers canvassing the [Third Ward] in support of Mr. Spiller.”

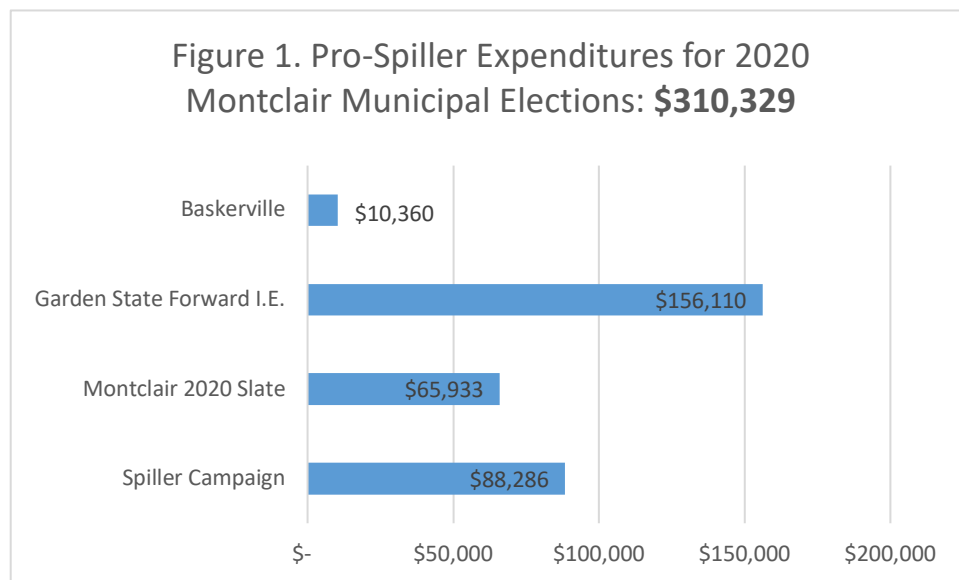
As discussed in detail later in this report, Sunlight has been forced to rely on circumstantial evidence because of inadequate disclosure by Garden State Forward on its ELEC filings. Both ELEC and reporters have also been forced to do so for the same reason. Of course, both the NJEA and Working Families know for certain exactly how much was spent in Montclair. Should

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<sup>1</sup> Other major 2020 municipal elections were held in Teaneck, Paterson, Atlantic City, Orange, Irvington, Belleville and Newark. According to ELEC filings, NJEA PAC made no direct contributions to candidates in any of these campaigns.

they refute Sunlight’s deductions with hard facts, Sunlight would happily make an adjustment to the numbers. In the meantime, as detailed above, *all indications are that the May 2020 independent expenditures for Working Families and CerillionN4 Partners were for Montclair*, and Sunlight believes it is fair to include them unless and until other facts come to light, just as ELEC, itself, did in the past.

Thus, as shown in Figure 1, adding the Cerillion mailers and the Working Families payment makes a total of \$156,110 spent by Garden State Forward, bringing the overall total spent to elect Spiller to \$310,329 – or thirty-times as much as Spiller’s opponent, Dr. Renee Baskerville, who spent a total of \$10,360.



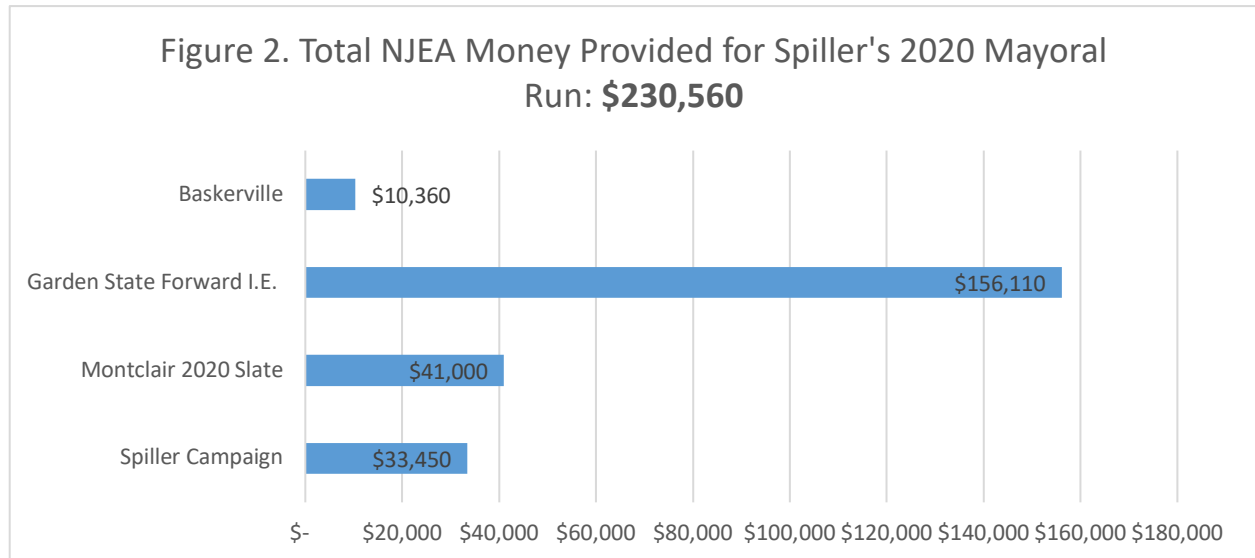
Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission

### The NJEA Provides Most of the Money for the Record-Breaking Spending

The NJEA has a lot invested in Spiller. He is the president of the organization. He has been paid millions of dollars as a NJEA officer. He is the most famous graduate of the NJEA’s Political Leadership Academy, which trains NJEA members to run for public office. He has been rumored to have gubernatorial ambitions and indeed the NJEA, itself, has [openly expressed the aspiration that some day a NJEA member could become governor](#). Being mayor of a large New Jersey town like Montclair would be a natural stepping-stone to a run for governor, perhaps after a second Phil Murphy term ends in 2025. As it happens, Spiller’s three-year term as NJEA president will end in 2024, so he could run for governor full-time in 2025.

It would therefore come as no surprise that the NJEA would be all-in to get Spiller elected mayor, and all-in they were. Of the \$310,329 spent in support of Spiller, the NJEA and its allies provided \$230,560. As Figure 2 shows, Garden State Forward’s \$156,110 in independent expenditures, NJEA PAC’s \$41,000 donation to the Spiller slate, and the \$33,450 in donations by

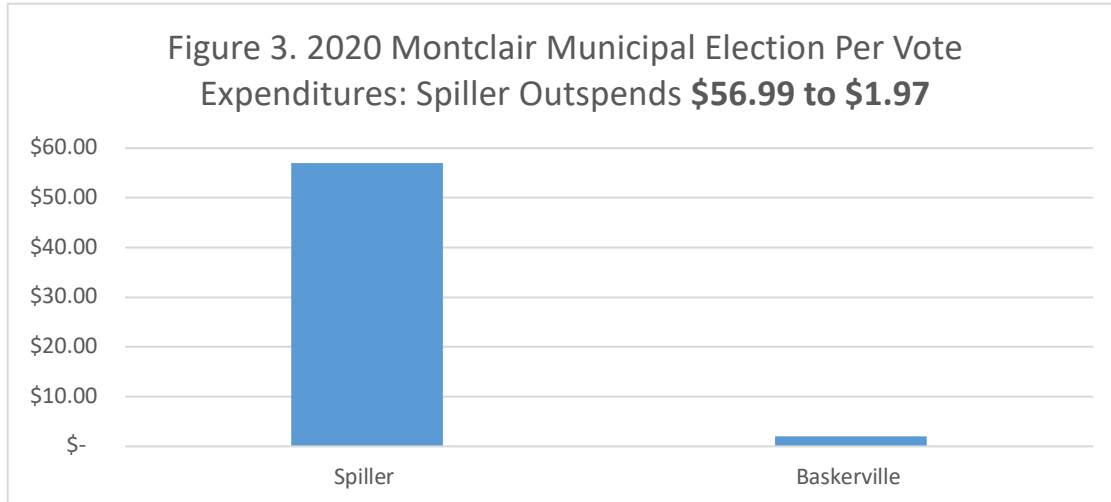
the NJEA and its allies to Spiller's own campaign makes for a total of at least \$230,560 of NJEA money. (The total could be larger because there were likely NJEA members or allies among the \$28,846 donated in amounts less than \$300 to the campaign and the slate, which are not reported by ELEC.) This is a serious amount money raised for a May municipal election, and it absolutely dwarfs the \$10,360 raised by Dr. Baskerville.



Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission

### The Election Result: Spiller Spent \$56.99 Per Vote Versus Baskerville's \$1.97

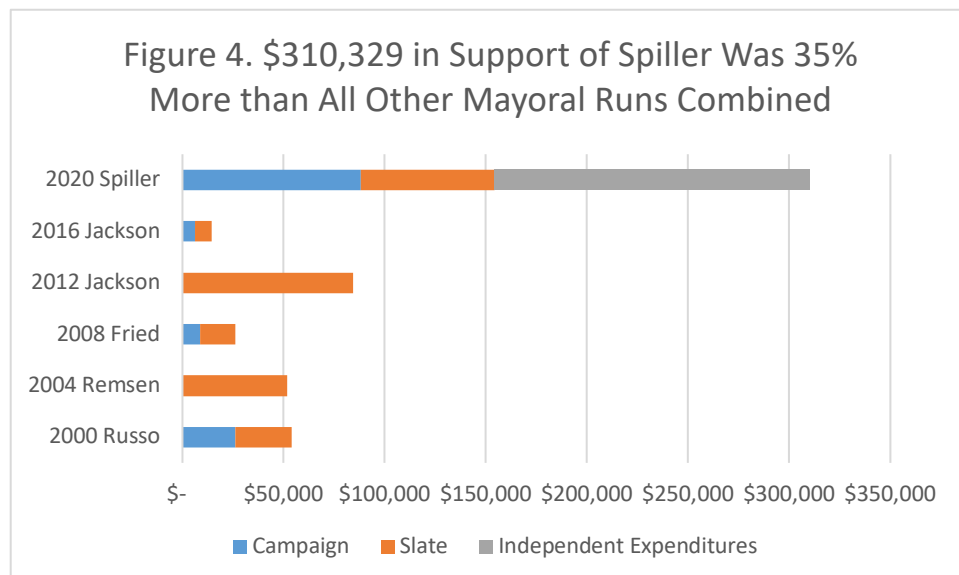
Despite this gusher of NJEA money, the election was very close. Spiller got 5,445 votes to Baskerville's 5,250, a difference of 195 votes, or 1.8% - with another [8% of the votes being disqualified](#). This despite [award-winning, slick videos by Spiller's go-to campaign consultants Publictics](#), an avalanche of mailers and the well-funded GOTV efforts by Working Families (no doubt augmented by NJEA/MEA "volunteers"). As shown in Figure 3, the \$310,329 spent on behalf of Spiller gained him 5,445 votes, or an astounding \$56.99 per vote. By comparison, Baskerville spent \$10,360 for 5,250 votes, or \$1.97 per vote.



Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission

**Spiller’s 2020 Mayoral Run Spent 35% More than All Previous Mayoral Runs Combined**

To get a sense of just how extraordinary the \$310,329 spent for Spiller was, Sunlight looked at all the successful mayoral runs in Montclair since 2000 (the last election for which ELEC data is available). The previous high for spending was Mayor Robert Jackson’s 2012 run, where his slate spent a total of \$84,361, so 3.5-times more was spent for Spiller than the previous high. Remarkably, and as shown in Figure 4, spending on Spiller’s 2020 run was *35% more than all the previous mayoral runs combined*: \$310,329 to \$230,654. Note the enormous impact of the NJEA’s independent expenditures, which have only ever been made in Montclair in support of Spiller in 2020 and 2016. (See Appendix B for a break-down of the numbers.)



Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission

## Inadequate Disclosure by Garden State Forward Both in Montclair and in the Past

Because the ELEC filings by Garden State Forward are inadequate, Sunlight has been forced to use circumstantial evidence to discern the real level of the NJEA's support for its president. As mentioned above, where the ELEC Form IND requires the "Legal Name of Election District or Municipality," Garden State Forward has written "Statewide." Clearly, "statewide" is not the "legal name" of a "district or municipality," and the use of such a non-specific description helps to obscure the dominant role the NJEA played in Spiller's election.

Oddly, the Garden State Forward has been allowed by ELEC to get away with such inadequate disclosure in the past as well. In its [White Paper No. 28](#) on the record-breaking 2017 battle to unseat Senate President Sweeney in Legislative District (LD) 3, ELEC was forced to do its own guesswork to estimate (not determine, estimate) that Garden State Forward spent \$5.4 million in the general election. In tallying the amounts, ELEC uses circumstantial evidence and reasonable assumptions to conclude that the spending was "likely done in the third district." That is because, like the May 2020 municipal filings, Garden State Forward's filings for the 2017 general election listed the district as "statewide."

Likewise, in the 2017 LD3 primary election, the [Observer](#) was able to identify \$317,800 in Garden State Forward spending because that ELEC filing listed the district as "3<sup>rd</sup> Legislative District." However, a subsequent filing listed an additional \$310,000 in spending as "statewide," so the *Observer* was forced to assume that this expenditure "likely included even more anti-Sweeney buys since no other political campaign has surfaced from the PAC" ... and "paid much of the money to the same two firms." One of these firms is the same CerillionN4 Partners that figured so prominently in Montclair.

Sunlight is perplexed as to why Garden State Forward is not held to the letter of the law in its filings. ELEC's Form IND asks for specific amounts as well as the legal name of the district or municipality because that is important information that voters should know. It is quite clear that the NJEA is trying to obscure its spending because that serves its purposes. But why is ELEC permitting this evasion?

## CONCLUSION

No wonder Spiller can consider losing the power to appoint the school board with such apparent equanimity. The record-breaking amount of money spent to elect Spiller in 2020 makes it clear that even if Montclair citizens were to succeed in their quest for an elected school board, the NJEA can and will swoop in to support its favored candidates whenever it chooses. Clearly money is no object when it comes to getting its way. Having now tilted the playing field for mayoral and town council elections, will the NJEA come to dominate school board elections as well? Will local Montclair citizens without Super PACs, professional PR consultants, and paid political operatives be able to compete with the NJEA juggernaut?



But all New Jersey citizens should take note of what happened in the 2020 Montclair mayoral election. We now have a political system where a taxpayer-funded, state-level special interest can throw unlimited amounts of money in support of favored candidates in purely local elections and potentially overwhelm the political efforts of ordinary citizens. Perhaps this is strictly legal, but are New Jersey citizens comfortable with this sort of distortion of local politics or with their tax dollars funding a state-level Goliath against local citizen-funded Davids?

Finally, is Spiller's successful mayoral campaign in Montclair a sign of things to come in a Spiller gubernatorial run in 2025? New Jersey citizens must recognize that the NJEA takes in over \$140 million of their tax dollars every year and spends most of it on politics. If Spiller the local mayoral candidate can get \$310,329 in support – mostly from the NJEA and its allies – then what can we expect for gubernatorial candidate Spiller? Recall that the NJEA dropped \$6.6 million (for both the primary and general elections) in a single legislative district in an effort to unseat Senate President Sweeney in 2017, helping make it the most expensive state legislative race in US history. It begs the question of what the NJEA would do to get their current president elected governor.

This is what happens when a state allows its political system to be rigged so that taxpayers are funding special interests. They become too politically powerful and able to distort local political playing fields all over the state. And maybe someday the whole state.

## APPENDIX A

### NJEA and Allied Donors to Spiller's 2020 Campaign

Donor	NJEA Affiliation	Amount
Community for Academic Excellence	Wayne EA - NJEA Affiliate	\$8,000
NJEA PAC	NJEA	\$7,500
Marie Blistan and Family	NJEA President	\$5,100
Brendan Gill	New Direction – NJEA ally	\$2,500
Marcia Marley	BlueWaveNJ – NJEA ally	\$1,500
Maurice Koffman	NJEA	\$1,000
Passaic Cty. EA PAC	NJEA affiliate	\$1,000
Robert Fagella	NJEA lawyer	\$500
Passaic County EA	NJEA affiliate	\$500
Carol Pierce	NJEA	\$500
Michael Flynn	NJEA	\$500
Dean Nielsen (CerillionN4 Partners)	NJEA PR consultant	\$500
Ron Greco	Jersey City EA - affiliate	\$500
Mayrose Wegman	NJEA	\$500
Bergen Cty. EA	NJEA affiliate	\$500
Luis Delgado	NJEA	\$450
Dennis Carroll	Passaic Cty. EA - affiliate	\$400
Sean Spiller Loan	NJEA officer	\$2,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$33,450</b>

Source: [Election Law Enforcement Commission](#)

## APPENDIX B

Year	Campaign	Slate	Independent Expenditures	Total
2000 Russo	\$26,009	\$28,124	\$-	\$54,133
2004 Remsen	\$-	\$51,727	\$-	\$51,727
2008 Fried	\$8,630	\$17,503	\$-	\$26,133
2012 Jackson	\$-	\$84,361	\$-	\$84,361
2016 Jackson	\$6,200	\$8,100	\$-	\$14,300
2020 Spiller	\$88,286	\$65,933	\$156,110	\$310,329

Source: Election Law Enforcement Commission (Russo [campaign](#), [slate](#); Remsen [slate](#); Fried [campaign](#), [slate](#); 2012 Jackson [slate](#); 2016 Jackson [campaign](#), [slate](#))