

Primary Colors: Mark Mantovani Hopes to Take Down Steve Stenger. Is St. Louis County Ready for Another Outsider?

By Patrick Collins

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On an unseasonably warm afternoon in early May, Hazel Erby, who has represented the first district on the St. Louis County Council since 2004, stands before a small audience and announces that the time for a new county executive has arrived.

After outlining a litany of current County Executive Steve Stenger's shortcomings, which Erby says include bullying, lack of communication with the council, divisiveness, hostility and general dysfunction, the councilwoman says simply, "It's time for a change." The group — mainly African American Democrats from north county — applauds politely.

The occasion, officially, is the grand opening of Mark Mantovani's north-county campaign headquarters, a cramped affair situated in a strip mall on a winding, rural-feeling road north of Interstate 270 in Florissant.

The real reason for the gathering, however, is that the Fannie Lou Hamer Democratic Coalition of St. Louis County, a group of elected African Americans that Erby chairs, is endorsing Mantovani. On August 7, Mantovani will face off against Stenger in the Democratic primary. Because the Republicans have not

put forth a contender with significant name recognition, the winner of the primary will likely coast to a victory in the general election on November 6.

Mantovani and Stenger make for interesting rivals. They both grew up in working-class families in Affton and graduated from Catholic high schools — Mantovani from Saint Louis University High, Stenger from Bishop DuBourg — and they are both trained as lawyers. They've each moved up in the world, Stenger to Clayton, Mantovani to Ladue. Mantovani, who recently completed a Harvard fellowship, is known as an entrepreneurial former CEO. Stenger is a CPA who got elected to the county council in 2009 and became county executive in 2015.

Mantovani and Stenger each have plenty to say about why the other should not run St. Louis County, which is home to nearly a million people (one-sixth of the total population of the state of Missouri) and boasts a 2018 operating budget of nearly \$665 million. Mantovani echoes Erby's dissatisfaction with the status quo and then some, citing, among other things, Stenger's inability to work with the county council and the dark cloud of ethics-related controversies that seems to perpetually shadow him.

Not one to be outdone, Stenger charges that Mantovani, who has never held elected office, is running as a Democrat only because it's been almost 30 years since a Republican won the race for county executive. Stenger's claim is based largely on Mantovani's \$20,241 in donations to former Missouri Governor Eric Greitens, a rising star in the Republican Party (and champion of right-to-work

laws) until his ascent was aborted by personal and financial scandals that led to his resignation June 1. Mantovani says that he, like many others, was misled by Greitens, that he vehemently opposes right-to-work and that he's donated to plenty of Democrats, including Hillary Clinton and Claire McCaskill.

But Stenger insists the donations and Mantovani's tweets in support of the former governor, which his campaign says were lost when Mantovani's personal account was merged into the campaign's account, constitute an investment in right-wing ideology.

Erby is unfazed. "Mark understands that when we all have equal access to opportunity, the entire region prospers," she says. "When we don't, our whole community fails."

Erby, who toggles effortlessly back and forth between being Stenger's most visible and vocal critic and Mantovani's staunchest supporter, personifies the dilemma facing St. Louis County voters. Are Mantovani's big, bold ideas enough to overcome his lack of elected experience in his quest to transform the region toward a brighter future? Or is he simply someone other than Stenger?

One thing is certain: Erby is far from alone in her desire for a new executive. In April, led by Webster Groves Mayor Gerry Welch, nearly twenty elected officials, including the mayors of Cool Valley, Des Peres, Frontenac, Moline Acres, Pine Lawn and Rock Hill, threw their support behind Mantovani in an unusually public gesture. It's second nature for local leaders to trash-talk each

other behind closed doors and off the record, but Stenger's adversaries express their desire to "get rid of the current dysfunction," as former Clayton Mayor Linda Goldstein put it, in front of cameras and microphones.

The concerns with Stenger expressed in April revolved for the most part around an inability — or unwillingness — to collaborate and a consistent lack of communication from the executive's office.

But it's questions about ethics that seem to have the most tenacity. At the moment, Exhibit A in the case against Stenger's reelection is his handling of leases at Crossings at Northwest, formerly Northwest Plaza, in St. Ann.

Robert and P. David Glarner are brothers, developers and, since Missouri's Amendment 2 does not apply to county or municipal candidates, major-league Stenger supporters — the \$365,000 they've donated so far, in fact, is unprecedented in St. Louis County elections. While there's nothing hidden or "dark" about the donations, it's widely believed that the brothers' patronage fits tongue and groove with the twenty-year lease of nearly 150,000 square feet of redeveloped office space the county entered into at Crossings at Northwest, which the Glarners happen to own. The deal will cost the county between \$69 and \$77 million.

Mantovani has pounced on it — who wouldn't? — referring to Crossings at Northwest as "the Glarner Mall." Mantovani has also said that if he's elected he will not accept any campaign contributions until the year of the next election

arrives in 2022 and that he will never accept any money from any individual or organization doing business with the county.

Others have questions about Stenger's wheelings and dealings as well. Missouri Attorney General Josh Hawley filed a lawsuit against the county executive's office, alleging violation of open-records law, and the St. Louis County Council, after reviewing a report prepared by its ethics commission, voted 5-0 to request state and federal law enforcement look into the Crossings at Northwest leases.

Stenger is equally critical of contributions Mantovani has accepted. Mantovani, who ponied up \$1 million of his own money to run, is his own largest donor. The vast majority of other contributions are \$500 or less and are from individuals rather than the LLCs that have donated so voluminously to Stenger.

There are notable exceptions, however. Dave Spence, a 2012 Republican candidate for Missouri governor and an unabashed advocate for right-to-work laws, contributed \$5,000; longtime Republican George Herbert Walker, who served as ambassador to Hungary during the administration of his second cousin, George W. Bush, has contributed \$11,000.

While Stenger points to donations and contributions as evidence that Mantovani is not really a Democrat — a distinction he says is important when it comes to the more difficult parts of the county executive's job, such as balancing the budget — it's important to note that the Republican Party is not entirely absent from Stenger's list of donors, either. Stenger has accepted donations from former

Missouri Governor and U.S. Senator Kit Bond and from Douglas Albrecht, chairman of the Bodley Group, who donated \$160,800 to the Republican National Committee between 1991 and 2016.

Mantovani's single biggest criticism of his opponent isn't the ethics issue but Stenger's overall approach to leading the county. "Your average captain of a high school football team gets the kids together over the summer and sets the course," Mantovani says. "I never hear any vision or agenda from him so far as aspiration for our community goes. His approach is very transactional."

He adds that the current executive had very little to do with his decision to enter the race. "I didn't start this mission because of Steve Stenger," he says. "I started it because I have concerns about my community."

His concerns can be summed up with one word: decline.

At the dawn of the 1960s, as Mantovani was coming of age, St. Louis, with a population of 750,026, was the tenth largest city in the U.S. In the mid-1960s, when the McDonnell Douglas-made Gemini spacecraft was nudging the U.S. ahead of the Soviet Union in the space race that garnered worldwide attention, Mantovani recalls classmates looking on nervously because their parents had worked on the project. On the ground, Busch Stadium II opened downtown in May 1966 with the Cardinals beating the Braves 4-3 in twelve innings. The following year, on June 10, 1967, the Gateway Arch welcomed its first visitors. During the 1960s two new professional sports franchises — the Blues and the

football Cardinals — decided to settle down in St. Louis. And Mantovani's favorite nugget of local lore: One of the six newspapers President John F. Kennedy read every day was the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

"When I was growing up, this seemed to me like a place of prominence, a place that gave people the opportunity to achieve whatever they wanted," he says.

"When I talk to young people today about what it was like here, their eyes get big."

Matt Pijut, 32, is a member of the demographic Mantovani believes is critical to moving the region forward. He grew up in south county with Mantovani's son, but when he got hired at Ansira shortly after graduating from the University of Missouri in 2008, he had no idea that his friend's dad was the CEO.

Ansira is the digital marketing agency that Mantovani took over at the request of a legal client. It grew dramatically, from 50 employees to more than 800, under his leadership. Mantovani took a tax credit on the building at Locust and Jefferson that he moved the agency into, but defends the decision by pointing to job creation and the rejuvenation the neighborhood has undergone since Ansira's arrival. "The average employee age there was under 30," Mantovani recalls. "I thought I was going there to mentor young people, but I'm the one who learned."

Pijut, who lives in Glendale, believes that Mantovani is the right person for the county-executive job because he takes a holistic approach to learning about the needs of different communities, he's not afraid of conflict and he's endlessly

curious. "His curiosity wasn't always focused on how to be more profitable," Pijut says. "It was focused on: Are we using the data and insight we are collecting in the best way possible?"

Regardless of who wins the election, Pijut fears for the region's future for reasons that align with some of Mantovani's priorities.

Pijut grew up in south county and he loves living here, but his wife, who is not a native, does not share his enthusiasm. Like many, they are concerned about violent crime, especially now that they are parents. They welcomed their first child — a boy — the day that Eric Greitens resigned. The significance of the date in Missouri history is duly noted in their son's baby book.

"It's becoming harder to blindly defend St. Louis," he says. "Crime used to seem highly prevalent in certain areas, and you could argue that crackdowns needed to happen in those areas. But just recently a young woman was mugged in a parking garage in Brentwood — an area that not long ago would have been deemed 'safer.'"

There's something else that bothers Pijut: Indianapolis.

When the cloud-computing company Salesforce located several hundred jobs there and put its name on the city's tallest building, it stung. "Fifteen or twenty years ago, it would have been comical to think of Indy as ahead of St. Louis in

terms of attracting major corporations and talent," Pijut says. "So to see major corporations leave St. Louis while other major corporations set up a large-scale presence in Indy is disheartening."

Unlike the blue wave Democrats are counting on in November, the one that will be powered by candidates who are younger, more female and less fair-skinned than ever before, Mantovani is an affluent white guy who wears tailored suits and has eight grandchildren. "But," he says, holding his hand up as if to stop traffic, "I do not think like any 64-year-old I know."

He doesn't always behave like one, either. After his stint as CEO of Ansira, Mantovani and his wife of 40 years, Patty, headed for Boston and a Harvard fellowship rather than retreating to Ladue. He developed a taste for how entrepreneurship and public service can intersect.

He also began taking a closer look at other cities. Why does Boston take a completely different approach to policing? How does Atlanta leverage its racial diversity as a competitive advantage? What makes Chattanooga so attractive to startups? "I'm not suggesting that St. Louis try to become Boston," he says. "But as county executive, I want to champion innovation. I think we can learn a lot from what works in other places."

Closer to home, Mantovani points to two issues that would have been handled differently had he been at the helm of St. Louis County: Major League Soccer and Uber.

"We're not going to attract young, innovative thinkers by opposing Uber the way we did when it first came to town," he says. "Whether we were right or wrong is almost beside the point. You don't make a national cause out of fighting a disruptive technology that's viewed in a very positive way by young people."

In 2017, in an election that drew an unusually high turnout, voters in the city of St. Louis rejected the opportunity to help finance a soccer stadium. Mantovani believes the failure to build a 25,000-seat facility sends the wrong message to a demographic he believes is critical to the future of the region: males between the ages of 18 and 34, for whom soccer is an increasingly popular spectator sport.

The day after the election, Stenger told reporters that the county didn't participate because it had never been given a proposal to evaluate. Mantovani insists the county's lack of participation is the main culprit in a failure he says sends the wrong message. "This would have been a regional win, but the county stayed out of it," he says. "The county was MIA."

Whether Mantovani is talking about soccer or crime or the failure to make it past Amazon's initial cut, his foundational theme is that the area's phenomenal degree of fragmentation is a real problem.

From police departments to gay-pride festivals (the region hosted three last month), to say that St. Louis lacks cohesion is in and of itself an understatement. The Meramec, Mississippi and Missouri rivers set the natural stage for obstacles, but it is the 1876 secession of the city of St. Louis from St. Louis

County that Mantovani considers the most detrimental (and the most repairable) source of fragmentation.

Mantovani believes that Better Together, the Rex Sinquefeld-funded effort to join city and county, has good intentions. But he doesn't support the organization's methodology, which would ultimately put the matter before voters throughout the state. He believes a better approach would be to convene a board of electors to draw up a plan for making St. Louis the 91st municipality in St. Louis County and then place it before both city and county voters. If approved, it would enable the city to get out of the business of being a county by centralizing functions such as tax assessment, moving them from Market Street to Clayton.

Mantovani isn't naive to the likelihood of resistance from entrenched city interests, but he believes the biggest challenge would be convincing voters in St. Louis County that they wouldn't be taking on the city's financial woes by reuniting. "Each municipality in St. Louis County is responsible for its own financial situation," he says. "When the city of St. Louis becomes the 91st municipality, it will retain full responsibility for its budget."

Mantovani would also like to create an office of municipal affairs, which he says would require funding but would also benefit the region by supporting the good work being done in a siloed fashion across the county.

True to its St. Louis roots, the contest between Mantovani and Stenger is in some ways a racial one.

In 2014, Stenger, then a member of the county council, challenged and beat the county's first African American executive, Charlie Dooley, also a Democrat. Many, including Mantovani and Erby, recall Stenger's campaign as a racially motivated undertaking disguised as a crusade against corruption.

"That campaign was about criminalizing an African American incumbent," Mantovani says.

Erby believes Stenger is trying to make amends in time for the primary. "Right now he's making the rounds at black churches, singing 'Amazing Grace,'" she says. "It's insulting."

Interestingly, as the incumbent in 2014, Dooley ran ads against challenger Stenger accusing him of being a pro-life conservative disguised as a Democrat. Four years later, Stenger, now in the incumbent's seat, is lobbing the same charges at his challenger.

Mantovani doesn't sugarcoat the area's penchant for putting its worst face forward when it comes to racial issues, whether it's the cascading towers of Pruitt-Igoe or tear gas and tanks on the streets of Ferguson.

"We are a community that is deeply segregated," he says. "Contrast that with Atlanta, which was smaller than St. Louis when I was a kid but seems to have done a much better job embracing diversity and being inclusive. They've brought more energy to their challenges and progressed in ways we have not."

To move St. Louis forward in that area, Mantovani doesn't offer quick fixes or talking points. Instead he suggests a more long-term approach centered around conversations that include voices of those who have not always been welcome. "You can't lead a community if you don't understand its components," he says. "I can't wait to work with all different kinds of people."

Erby has confidence in his ability to move the region in the right direction. "Steve Stenger doesn't respect the black community, but I've been assured he doesn't respect white communities either," she says. "He's an equal opportunity A-hole. Mark's character, on the other hand, exhibits integrity. He's very careful about who he aligns himself with."

Mantovani's concerns about pervasive racism, the city-county split and the region's general decline for that matter are nothing new. But he thinks the timing is in his favor.

"Communities reach a tipping point where everyone says enough," he says. "And I believe we're there. The NFL left town for the second time, we failed to attract a soccer team because the county was MIA, leaving all of the burden on the city's shoulders, and Amazon didn't even consider us seriously."

In some ways, though, the timing couldn't be worse. Shortly after his swearing-in, in February 2017, a beaming Eric Greitens sat in an abandoned warehouse in Springfield and signed legislation that made Missouri the country's 28th right-to-work state. Organized labor, seeking to freeze the law's passage and put the issue before Missouri voters, leveraged a rarely used maneuver, the referendum petition, and proceeded to collect 310,000 signatures.

But rather than place the right-to-work question on the general election ballot in November, the Missouri House and Senate voted this May to relegate the issue to the August primary. Many believe the presence of right-to-work on the ballot will draw organized labor to the polls in numbers that are unusually high for a primary — and, in the process, hurt Mantovani, who hasn't been able to completely shake the association with Greitens that Stenger has emphasized since the beginning of the campaign.

The other question, of course, is whether or not the voters are open to a political outsider like Mantovani. It's 2018, and the air seems heavy with fatigue caused by a disgraced former governor and a president who was elected because he "tells it like it is" and promised to drain swamps in Washington — both figures who convinced voters that their lack of political experience was in fact advantageous.

On the other hand, the race could come down to exactly what kind of credentials are most important to St. Louis County voters. Without a doubt, Mantovani is sorely lacking when it comes to political experience. But he's also short on

experience being investigated for ethics issues. It's entirely up to the voters to decide which outweighs the other.