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JACK'S BACK ON TRACK

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Something like 500 ravenous people descended on a gourmet and country music fund-raiser Saturday afternoon in Milton for state Treasurer Jack A. Markell.

If only someone had told them what the fund-raiser was *for*.

They got Jack in their food with a side dish called "Jack in the Beans," which was baked beans laced with Jack Daniels whiskey. They got Jack in their music with "Jackson" from "Walk the Line," the movie about Johnny Cash.

They did not get jack from a smiling Jack Markell, who never pledged to serve a full four-year term when re-elected last year and was assumed to be running for governor in 2008 -- until last month when there was nearly a deal, brokered by U.S. Sen. Thomas R. Carper, to avoid a Democratic primary by having Lt. Gov. John C. Carney Jr. go for governor and Markell for lieutenant governor.

The deal fell apart when the Democratic field for lieutenant governor could not be cleared, and the crowd at the fund-raiser was itching for Markell to say he was running for governor. Instead, there were only the generic "I Back Jack" political signs as decoration and a lot of teasing, winking and nudging in the speechmaking.

The elements certainly were all there for Markell to declare for governor -- his parents, his wife and their two children, as well as a guest-celebrity appearance by Tubby Raymond, the University of Delaware's retired football coach who was a neighbor when Markell was growing up in Newark, and a bunch of students, designated the "Jacklings," who were chanting, "'08! '08! '08!"

State Rep. Peter C. Schwartkopf, a Rehoboth Beach Democrat who introduced Markell to the crowd, tried to wheedle an announcement out of him. "This is the beginning, Jack," he said. "We're all dancing around the bush. No one wants to say it out loud. You sure you don't have something you want to tell these people today?"

All that Markell would tell them was that he would tell them. "I know people are expecting a big announcement today, but you're not going to be getting a big announcement today," he said. "You'll be hearing something from me in the next few days."

Announcement or not, Markell's remarks were as gubernatorial as it gets.

"I know some of you are here for the beer, some of you are here for the Grey Goose [vodka] olives, but all of you are here for something else, because we know Delaware can do better," he said.

Markell rattled off some improvements that are needed in education and health care and the appalling statistic that Delaware ranks 50th out of 50 states in business creation. He mentioned a pop tune "Waiting on the World to Change," which his children like, and said "It's a great song, but it's dead wrong, because now is the time."

It was a summery outlook to match the day, gloriously hot for the things that make it worthwhile to be in Delaware, like the beach and NASCAR race weekend at Dover Downs and the personal politicking of a small state.

Markell's fund raiser was called the "4th Annual Summer Bash," an extravaganza staged by Corey Marshall-Steele, who works in the state treasurer's office, in a field next to the house he shares with his partner Douglas Marshall-Steele in Milton.

Corey Marshall-Steele and about 60 volunteers spent three weeks cooking and setting up a huge tent and food stations featuring those Grey Goose olives that Markell mentioned and more than 30 other epicurean treats, such as Spicy Apple Grilled Chicken Wraps, Lemon-Caper Potato Salad and Kahlua Chocolate Trifle.

Marshall-Steele also brought in Deborah Allen, the country music singer, and subtitled his summer bash, "When Memphis Comes to Milton for Markell."

As thick as the crowd was, it was thin on Democratic politicians, not surprising, as they stayed away because they either did not want to take sides or were committed to Carney. There were appearances by Sussex County Democratic Chair Thomas J. Chapman, Vice Chair Peter Schott and Sussex County Sheriff Eric D. Swanson, however, and also by Brian F. Dolan, a lawyer from Milton and former legislative candidate who is taking sides.

"I think Jack should run for governor because he's the most qualified candidate who's likely to win. I think a Markell administration would emphasize qualifications over connections, and that's what Delaware needs," Dolan said.

Schott, who is the president of the Delaware Stonewall Democrats for gay party members, said what a lot of party people are thinking. "Jack's probably the best state treasurer we've ever had. If he wants, he should move on. At the same time, a primary could be dangerous for us, so I'm hoping it can be resolved. I would like to see him serving us in Washington in some capacity," he said.

Markell's strategy has not been to count on the party. He toured all 41 state representative districts last year, collecting followers of his own, and the crowd at the fund-raiser included David Carter, a state worker from the Department of Natural Resources & Environmental Control, a longtime independent voter who was impressed enough to switch his registration and now calls himself a "Markell Democrat."

There was also Tubby Raymond. He is a Republican -- "I'm about as conservative as Genghis Khan" - but he is a Markell man.

Raymond joked to the crowd that he had no idea why he was there, except that he had seen the Markell signs and suggested, "Let's go in and get something to eat. I'm sure it's free."

Then Raymond got serious, or at least semi-serious, saying, "I helped raise Jack Markell. We called him 'Jackie' at the time. I don't know what he's doing, but I'll tell you this. I'd vote for him for anything."

The speeches were over. It was time for Deborah Allen and her country music. It felt like a political letdown, all that buildup for Markell topping out without going anywhere. Those country music singers, though, are a little more plain-spoken than the average politician, and if Memphis was coming to Milton for Markell, she was going to say why.

"Jack Markell -- Delaware's next governor!" Allen whooped. "You know it's true!"

Markell waved, and the music played.

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