

**OFF THE FLOOR IV: After Frazier's loss, Onorato needs a drink [tax solution.]**  
**OFF THE FLOOR A Capitolwire Column**

**By Peter L. DeCoursey, Bureau Chief, Capitolwire**

PHILADELPHIA (April 22) – In the 21st state House District, Allegheny County Councilwoman Brenda Frazier’s future looked bright.

Rep. Lisa Bennington, D-Allegheny, was stepping down. Elsie Hillman and Teresa Heinz, the grande dames of liberalism and support for women candidates out west, were for her. Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato was an ally and friend, although he was officially neutral, of course.

Then the tavern owners and restaurateurs of Allegheny County, still furious about the 10-percent drinks tax Onorato passed onto them – which he did after the Legislature gave him no other good alternative to provide local funding for mass transit – decided that Frazier would be a good outlet for their anger.

And they are angry. When you go into a bar in Allegheny County, many of them have added a new line to the bottom of the bill. When you look it over to sign it and figure out the tip, there, in clear letters, as a separate part of your bill, is the “Onorato Tax.”

That is what they call it on your bill. So now that you understand the new Revolt of the Day is, in the land of the Shays Rebellion, and about 200 others, we move to Brenda Frazier.

As a black elected official running in a district where that should be helpful, and a sitting councilperson, she was considered the front-runner in a tough field. Leonard Bodack Jr. also had a base in the district, as did his dad, former state Sen. Leonard Bodack, and the third candidate was ex-Pittsburgh Police Chief Dom Costa, a distant cousin of state Rep. Paul Costa and state Sen. Jay Costa, both D-Allegheny.

The drink-tax bashers hit her hard and effectively, spending more to attack her than Frazier spent in the first 18 weeks of her 20-week primary campaign.

Did it work? Well, you be the judge. According to the state bureau of elections unofficial returns, Costa won with 4,773 votes, followed by Bodack with 4,488 votes and Frazier with 4,411.

Whaddayathink? Could \$30,000 of negative ads about a drink tax cost Frazier 363 votes, enough to win? Or drive that many of her votes to Costa or Bodack? Absolutely.

Which is why late in the race, three sources told me, Onorato got involved to help Frazier raise some money so she could combat these attacks. Onorato did that partly because he and Frazier are in the same boat.

If the anti-drinks-tax issue works against Frazier, won’t it work better if Onorato wants to run for governor or U.S. Senate in 2010?

To be honest, I am not so sure how resonant this issue will be, but the fact that Onorato quietly helped Frazier raise money shows he is taking it seriously, like trying to get a little bump on your back removed before it can become a tumor.

Except that if Onorato was test-marketing responses to attacks on the drink-tax vote, I would say none of the answers worked any better than U.S. Sen. Barack Obama’s attempts to explain away his “bitter” remark.

Unlike Obama, Onorato isn’t telling people not to talk about his vulnerable issue, and for awhile there, it seemed like Onorato was proposing a new alternative every other day.

And in these Allegheny County results, we see why he is still searching for an answer. And we can see in Frazier’s loss that he hasn’t found one yet.

Maybe he should just relax, have a drink and work on it again tomorrow. If I were Onorato, I’d drink at home, though. If they put your name on a tax line between the cost of your food and the cost of your beverages and the tip line, you’re probably not welcome.