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Newly-elected N.J. councilman apologizes for blackface photo

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A newly elected New Jersey borough councilman apologized Saturday for wearing blackface several years ago as part of a Halloween costume, after a local anti-racism group demanded he atone for his actions or resign.

Vincent Kelly, 62, was one of two Republicans to win seats earlier this week on the Pitman Council, in Gloucester County, according to preliminary election results. Not long after, the Pitman Anti-Racist Collective raised concerns about a photo online showing Kelly in blackface.

“I apologize to anyone who may be hurt by my costume choice of years ago,” Kelly wrote in a statement posted on the Pitman GOP Facebook page.

Kelly said he attended a Halloween Party in 2008 where guests dressed as celebrities. He chose Flavor Flav, the rapper best known for co-founding the group Public Enemy.

“At the time Flavor Flav’s yelling of ‘yeah boy’ made him incredibly popular” and “wearing the costume was a celebration of his fame,” Kelly said in the statement.

He said he “briefly” used the picture years later on his Facebook page “during the Halloween season.”

The photo no longer appears to be online.

“I do understand that we live in a very different time and today, even as a celebration of one’s fame, I would not even consider wearing a costume that included blackface,” he added.

Kelly promised to reach out to the Pitman Anti-Racist Collective to have “some open, honest dialogue.”

In response, the group said it was “relieved that Councilman-elect Kelly has apologized and acknowledged the gravity of appearing in blackface,” according to a statement from spokeswoman Judy Walker and other members.

The collective looks forward to talking and hopes the councilman will participate in diversity, equity and inclusion training, the statement said.

The goal wasn’t to “cancel” Councilman-elect Kelly, but educate him on the egregious practice of appearing in blackface, and the hurt it can cause,” Walker’s statement added.

Gloucester County Republican Party Chairwoman Jacqueline Vigilante previously said Kelly's costume choice "doesn't reflect on who he is as a person, a candidate and who he will be as a councilman."

Vigilante suggested the controversy may have been driven in part to distract from the GOP's recent electoral wins in the county.