

# Developers drive school board race

by Suzan Erem and Ben Brewer

If money talks, a handful of very wealthy Centre Countians will soon be running the State College Area school board. But to what end?

Some of the biggest developers in the region and their associates are among the major financial backers of the winners of the May primary election for school board. Familiar political and developer-related names like Paterno, Imbt, Suhey and Sahakian contributed thousands of dollars to help the challengers ride the campaign against the "\$100 million high school" to electoral victory.

Throwing money around at election time isn't anything new, especially in a state without restrictions on campaign donations for school board races, but the sheer scale of the funds dumped on the slate supported by Citizens for Better Solutions far outmatches anything in recent school board election history.

The latest campaign finance reports indicate that the landslide winners in the May primary raised more than \$54,000—primarily from large donations between \$500 and \$2,000—compared to an estimated \$21,000 raised by the incumbents, who received more contributions but in smaller amounts.

"I've never seen anything like that," said local political activist and Foxdale Village resident Betty Grudin, who has lived in the area 18 years.

"This is an unpaid school board election. This kind of money is hard-sought-after for a presidential candidate. What's going on here?" said Tobin Short, a longtime school volunteer and co-chairman of Citizens for Constructive Progress, a group formed to encourage the board to continue with its renovation plan. "My answer is it's not people worried about their children getting lost in a big school. These are people concerned about land use." Short's two children attended schools in the district from second grade through high school.

One of the proposals of school board critics was to build a new school elsewhere in the district. Such a move would open up the current location to development. If both the North and South buildings were razed, as many as 594 three-bedroom apartments or townhouses could go in on the South side, which is zoned for dense residential use,

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— Tobin Short, co-chairman, Citizens for Constructive Progress

according to information from the State College Planning Department. The North side, which is zoned commercial, has the capacity for 495,000 square feet of floor area and 2,400 office workers.

Relocating the school or building a second one, another suggestion of school board critics, could also stimulate development around the new location.

RE/MAX real estate agent Scott Yocum, who contributed to the challengers' campaign, said a new school would push the value of nearby real estate up.

RE/MAX real estate agent Scott Yocum, whose wife Glenda is chairwoman of the political committee to elect challenger Ann McGlaughlin. But he denied that developers were behind State High Vision, the nonprofit that organized the movement against the high school renovation.

"I don't know how anybody would benefit from a new school other than architects and construction people," Yocum said.

Short, a Republican, said developers would also have a lot to gain.

"It's dead-obvious. If you put a high school at the growth boundary, you will kill the growth boundary," he said. "Put a school out there and you will push the growth boundary to I-99, and you will make developers very happy."

Mike Meacham, campaign manager for the incumbents' Team for the Future, said moving the school would create not only development but subsidies for development.

"If a school is built outside the edge of town, the school district will pay for infrastructure, for roads, sewer and water," he said. "That's a developer's dream."

Citizens for Better Solutions, a political committee formed to support the challengers, counts major developers and contractors, as well as some Centre County household names, among its contributors.

John Imbt, a developer and owner of the construction company HRI Inc., gave \$3,000 to CBS. He is planning to build an

"urban village," similar to downtown State College, on 172 acres of land in Ferguson Township, next to Circleville Farm. Imbt is co-owner, with Betsy Suhey, of Aurum Jewelers, which donated \$2,000 to CBS.

Betsy's brother Paul Suhey, an orthopedic doctor and Penn State trustee, gave \$1,100 to CBS and \$100 each to challengers Ann McGlaughlin and Barney Grimes. Co-chairman of SHV, Suhey lobbied the school board in January 2006 to consider building a new high school on the Circleville Farm property, next to the tract owned by Imbt. The resulting feasibility study, which cost taxpayers \$20,000, determined that bussing students out to the regional growth boundary would be too expensive.

Among Suhey's criticisms of the school board's renovation proposal were its cost. But in 2003, as president of the nonprofit group State High Facilities and Athletic Support Team, Suhey spearheaded the effort to raise \$700,000 to help the school district pay for renovations to Memorial Field. Of that amount, \$575,000 went to the installation of new artificial turf. Work on Memorial Field was completed just two

weeks before the start of Suhey's son Kevin's final season as starting quarterback for State High.

A year after Suhey's Circleville proposal was rejected, David Paterno, well-known for his family name and developer connections, presented an alternative high school renovation plan to the school board. He maintained that his "Sensible Solution" had been developed independently of SHV. Paterno and his wife Lori gave \$700 to each of the challengers, for a total of \$3,500.

David's parents, Sue and Joe Paterno, threw another \$1,000 into the campaign. The Penn State football coach was involved in the development of The Village at Penn State, along with S&A Homes President Bob Poole.

Four members of the Sahakian family, which owns Uni-Mart and HFL Corporation, a commercial real estate company, gave \$1,250 each to CBS, for a total of \$5,000.

Frank and Anne Peno, the owners of PBCI-Allen mechanical and electrical, gave \$1,400 to challenger Chris Small and \$1,100 to CBS, of which Anne Peno is co-chairwoman.

Bruce Heim, who owns Keystone Real Estate Group and the Apartment Store Real Estate Group, contributed \$1,100 to CBS.

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The fate of the State College Area High School may rest in the hands of the developers who bankrolled the winners of the May primary election for school board.

Photo by Anna Brewer

# Health insurance crisis afflicts Happy Valley

by Melanie Caban

State College is not immune to the health-care crisis affecting millions of Americans across the nation. An estimated 11,000 local residents lack health insurance, and more than 30,000 don't have dental insurance, according to information gathered by Centre Volunteers in Medicine.

The number of Americans without health insurance rose to 47 million last year, almost 16 percent of the population, due to the continued loss of job-based coverage, according to a recent Census Bureau survey. The number of uninsured children increased by more than 611,000 to nearly 8.7 million.

"Everything's so expensive," said David Fink, an independent contractor from Boalsburg and one of the county's uninsured. "Either I'm deathly sick and need

"Everything's so expensive. Either I'm deathly sick and need prescription medicine, or I suck it up and get over-the-counter medicine."

— David Fink

prescription medicine, or I suck it up and get over-the-counter medicine."

CVIM has been providing free medical and dental care to uninsured Centre County residents since 2003. Staffed predominantly by volunteers, CVIM receives more than 7,000 visits a year.

With the number of uninsured steadily rising, CVIM is struggling to meet demand. There are more than 500 people on the waiting list for dental care.

"The need is so great," said Cyndy Biek, development director for CVIM.

But at a recent public meeting of Focus

Center County, where citizens gathered to determine which local issues were most worthy of a \$50,000 grant, health care did not emerge as one of the top five.

Little more is being done in Washington to abate the health care crisis. President Bush has vowed to veto legislation that would expand a children's health insurance program.

On the state level, Sen. Jim Ferlo, D-Allegheny, has proposed legislation that would provide health insurance to all Pennsylvania residents.

Senate Bill 300, the Family and Business Health Care Security, calls for a single-payer public health insurance program that would replace all private and governmental insurance, except Medicare and the Veterans Health Administration, while pre-

serving the private health care delivery system. The Ferlo legislation would be financed by a 10-percent payroll tax and a 3-percent income tax.

But for now, there are still thousands of local residents unable to get the medical and dental care they need.

Biek said CVIM needs more funding and volunteers to better meet demand. Another challenge is ensuring that those without insurance know where to go for care.

She said there is a tendency to ignore dental health until it becomes a problem, at which point people go to the emergency room for treatment.

"Our goal is to keep patients out of the emergency room," Biek said.

CVIM has five in-house volunteer dentists, who typically work 20 hours a week. In addition, the clinic has approximately 25 dentists who see patients in emergencies, three endodontists who provide one free root canal per month, a reduced fee schedule with five oral surgeons, and a periodontist available for consultation and work in certain cases.



Photo by Ben Brewer

Maggie Foster is a volunteer receptionist at Centre Volunteers in Medicine, a free health clinic in State College with a waiting list for dental care of more than 500 local residents.

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Patty Kleban, co-chairwoman (with Suhey) of SHV, defended the contributions, arguing that those powerful families can't be defined by a single economic interest. She noted that they are known for their generosity to many diverse causes and that many have children and grandchildren who have gone or are going through the school district.

"People try to paint it as, 'Oh, they want to build a new school for development purposes,'" she said. "Bruce Heim is on the board of Second Mile. He probably spends more time with that than his company. His concern is putting 3,000 kids in one building."

The challengers also got help from Harrisburg. Republican state Sen. Jake Corman, R-Benner Township, connected the anti-renovation campaign with State Street Strategies, the firm responsible for last spring's controversial anti-school board telephone survey. In June 2006, Corman, who does not live in the school district, said he would not take sides on the renovation debate, but instead offered to act as a medi-

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ator between the school board and community members opposed to the project.

CBS paid State Street Strategies \$25,238 to conduct mass mailings and the phone survey, described by many as a push poll. On April 5, approximately 9,000 households received an automated, anonymous telephone call asking whether they supported a State High construction project that would "result in higher taxes, while not improving education."

The telephone poll and four full-color mailings sent out by State Street Solutions for the challengers were part of an unprecedented campaign.

"Some of us have been in politics, and we knew, when we saw that, the kind of money that was going in," said Mary Depuis, who ran for school board 20 years ago. "Nothing like this has ever happened."

State Street Strategies, based in Harrisburg, is not listed in directory assis-

tance but shares an address with a group called Commonwealth Strategic Solutions. Mike Long, who answered Commonwealth's phone, confirmed the company is also known as State Street Strategies and handed the call over to Ray Zaborney.

"We took some heat for using and talking with Ray," explained Kleban. She said SHV had been in talks with Sen. Corman regarding the renovation debate and the senator recommended the consultant. SHV does not endorse candidates, Kleban clarified. CBS hired Zaborney, she said.

The money CBS paid State Street Strategies was more than all of the funds raised by the incumbents. They received only six donations of \$1,000 or more—compared to the challengers' 19—and three of those were from candidates themselves. Hendrickson, Dutton and Werner donated \$1,000 to their campaigns, joined by some other familiar local names, Richard and Sally Kalin, Barbara Palmer, and Marie and Fletcher Byrom, who donated another \$3,000 among them.

The financial winner on the incumbents' side is Mimi Barash Coopersmith, honorary chairwoman of Team for the Future. Her company, the Barash Group, had pulled in \$7,571 of the \$9,914 spent by the campaign as of the June reporting deadline. (Both campaigns have outstanding expenses that do not appear in the June campaign finance reports.)



Photo by Anna Brewer

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