

Politics and Food served at GOP Event

August 13, 2010

AllAboutArmonk.com caught up with several people who attended the North Castle Republican Party's recent barbecue. We asked Bob Cohen who is running for New York State Senate, "What do you think is the most important issue of small town politics?"

Cohen responded, "After speaking with many of Westchester's families, the number-one issue is property taxes. People just can't afford their homes anymore. They may have paid off their mortgages, but they still have to pay their property taxes, and they can no longer afford them. I've visited towns where six years ago, taxes were \$6,000, and now they are \$12,000. These people are telling me that if this continues and taxes jump from \$12,000 to \$24,000, they can't afford to stay in their homes anymore."

Tax increases impact seniors more than other age groups, because seniors and people on fixed incomes have received minimal increases in social security benefits. As the taxes go up, the home values go down, and it becomes harder to afford purchasing a house. Buyers can't afford houses and people can't afford to stay in their homes. This is not the way it should be. One of the things we absolutely need in New York State is a property tax cap. This will help every community. Let's say the cap is 2.5%. Taxes can increase up to 2.5%, but not above that. Let's say, for example, that the previous year's inflation rate was 1%; accordingly, taxes would only increase by 1%. Tax increases are either capped at 2.5% or 1%, depending on which number is lower, either the rate of inflation or the cap. There are a number of variations on the cap. One option that was voted down a couple of years ago was a 4% cap. The three people running for governor, Mr. Cuomo, Mr. Lazio, and Mr. Paladino, all support different variations of a property tax cap, but their concepts are the same. A tax cap is something we need.

Property taxes affect small businesses, and if people can't afford to live here, what will these communities do? We have to take control of our taxes. New York State has had the largest out-migration of people in the last decade of any state in America. We have the third highest income tax. Westchester County has the highest property taxes in the country. What are we doing? We're basically chasing our businesses and people out of the state.

We talked with Doug Martino, an Armonk resident running for Westchester County Court Judge. He will run on the Republican, Independence and Right to Life lines. His name will appear on the primary in September for the Conservative line. Even though his opponent was endorsed, leaders of the Conservative Party carried Martino's petitions. Martino is seeking additional signatures to petition a new party: the Tea Party. Anyone can sign the petition, as long as he or she hasn't already signed another County Court Judge petition. Once filed, these petitions indicate to the Westchester Board of Elections that a number of people want to see Doug Martino appear on the Tea Party line.

When asked, "What's important in small town politics?" Martino says, "Small town politics is based more upon personalities. On a local level, people are more likely to vote on relationships. But, for instance, in a governor's race, you look more at the political position, rather than the personality. Still, charisma and personality count, and they may overshadow political positions on any level. It happens all the time. But local politics are less about ideologies and more about getting things done. In theory, political positions shouldn't come into play for a judge. There may be philosophical differences, and that may affect how a case is decided, but a judge's decision should be based upon the existing law."

We asked Tony Futia, Superintendent of North Castle's Sewer and Water Department, "What's important in small town politics?" Futia says, "You can really look at any contested election and see small town politics. For many years, North Castle combined both parties and said, 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours', and they cross-endorsed. I got very upset with that practice and ran for Supervisor in 2005. We wanted to stop that. In the 1970's, a group of people formed the Independent Party and ran on that line. We didn't win, because the other parties were so powerful back then. If they had listened to the people instead of doing whatever they wanted, a lot of improvements could have been made. It was amazing how there were never any discussions at Town Board meetings. When things came up, they were unanimously passed; it was all settled before they went to the meetings. It is a lot different now. The meetings just have to be managed better. The back and forth is good, but you can't let it drag on."

Neal Baumann, resident and member of the North Castle Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, adds, "Small-town politics is about the lack of political affiliation once elected. In a town this small, once people get elected, politics shouldn't enter the decision-making process. All these issues are very personal, and unfortunately, just like national politics, it has become very divisive. Every year the issues seem to become more divisive. For many years, people on the Board tried to do what's best for the town - politics didn't matter. I'm not saying that's the way it is now, but small town politics is about getting elected as a neighbor. It has very little to do with a candidate's political affiliation."