

Consumer Party:

Third party struggles to overcome obstacles

By TODD LIGHTY and STEVE GRAHAM
Daily Collegian Staff Writers

The political campaign was in full swing by late September 1980. As the autumn leaves turned rusty brown, the campaign for U.S. House of Representatives was running smoothly for young Doug Mason. Everything indicated that his party would do well in the district. Yet something went wrong.

It happened in early October in the quiet office of a small-town newspaper in Venango County, where Mason, the Consumer Party candidate for the 23rd District seat, thought the newspaper was sincere in granting him an interview. This was Mason's big chance to express his political beliefs. After an hour in the editor's office, Mason believed the interview was successful. He was mistaken. It was never published.

"That was just the beginning of his troubles."

Election 1980

As Mason traveled throughout the 11-county area of the 23rd district, he experienced many negative reactions from the people. After all, he does represent a third-party interest — the Consumer Party.

"They're a bunch of radicals and socialists," some people shouted along the campaign route.

Perhaps Mason summed up many of the people's feelings toward the Consumer Party when he said, "I think we're kind of an outcast. The people think we go around yelling 'ballshit all the time.'" Even though he was easily defeated by Republican incumbent William F. Clinger, R-central Pa., in the November election, Mason represented a ray of hope for the party in the State College area.

Clinger received 123,274 votes to Mason's 3,138 in the congressional race. However, Mason got 2,079 votes in Centre County — 5.08 percent of the total votes. This, or so Mason was told, would give the Consumer Party automatic ballot status in any election held in Centre County. But again, the Consumer Party was delivered a setback.

Primary setback

On March 17, the party learned that the Centre County Board of Elections had ruled that the nominating petitions it circulated for the May primary election were invalid. And the Centre County Commissioners had unanimously decreed that the Consumer Party is not an "official" third party in the county.

In a letter to Tom Ortenberg, Consumer Party chairman, the commissioners gave their interpretation of Article 8 of the county's party organization code. The code specifies what conditions a party must meet in order to get ballot status.

"This is to advise that today the Board of Elections took action to reject the petition, which you (Ortenberg) filed for office of State College mayor," the letter states. "The Consumer Party does not qualify as a political party within the county of Centre County."

Denial of ballot status dashed the party's hopes of participating in tomorrow's primary. The dispute over the Consumer Party's status centers on Article 8. The commissioners' interpretation of the article states that the Consumer Party is a "political body," not a party.

The code defines a political body as an organization that can't participate in primaries and must petition to get its candidates on the ballot in general and municipal elections. Jeffrey Bower, county commissioner chairman, said, "The county solicitor recommended our decision be based on the congressional district," he said.

In the district, Mason received only 1.8 percent of the votes cast and not the arbitrary 5 percent the code requires.

Robert Rayman, attorney for the Consumer Party, said the fact that Mason received 5.08 percent of the vote in Centre County shows a significant interest in the party.

"I see the section of the electoral code," he said. "I think that (the commissioner's decision) is an erroneous interpretation."

Party sues

Because the commissioners failed to clarify their interpretation and refused to grant the Consumer Party ballot status for the November municipal elections, the party was forced to file suit against the commissioners, Ortenberg said.

"I think the commissioners were just wrong and are afraid to admit it," he said.

The party has filed a writ of Mandamus in the Centre County Court of Common Pleas, Rayman said. The writ asks public officials to perform their duties; something the commissioners have not done, he said. By filing suit, the party hopes to get automatic ballot status for the fall elections. However, the next step is a hearing before a judge, Rayman said.

The party has a "50-50 chance" of winning a favorable ruling by taking the commissioners to court, Rayman said. The act is unambiguously written, he said. "My belief is they (Consumer Party members) should get a clear interpretation from the commissioners," he said. "If they get 5 percent in an office in the county, I don't see how the commissioners could deny them status."

However, Bower said that if the party had received 5 percent of the vote said in a tripartite, it would have been granted ballot status.



Tom Ortenberg, left, chairman of the State College Consumer Party, appears at a press conference with Barry Commoner, former presidential candidate for the Citizens' Party, who discusses the future for the party nationally.

Ortenberg is not pleased with the commissioners' decision. "I believe they (commissioners) turned us down because of politics," Ortenberg said. "The decision was a deliberate attempt to snuff out the Consumer Party, to keep us off the ballot."

Lakshman Yapa, Consumer Party secretary, said the commissioners' decision seems unjust and indefensible. "This decision escapes elementary logic because we are not asking for ballot status in the district," he said. "The spirit of the law is to give ballot status to those who get a percent of the vote. Their decision isn't compatible with the way I read the law. It's certainly a non-sympathetic decision."

Local elections

Despite the setback over the party's ballot status, members said they will approach this fall's elections vigorously. With three vacancies on the State College Municipal Council and Mayor Arnold Addison's four-year term ending, the party is planning to run candidates in the municipal election.

Michael King, University associate professor of political science, said the Consumer Party should get ballot status. "My suspicion is that the Democrats and Republicans don't like third parties," he said. "The county commissioners are political people. Political and legal motives may be the same thing."

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Christopher Hall and Ray Boyle are its choices for the council positions, and Ortenberg had said he would run for mayor.

But Ortenberg withdrew from the race Wednesday. He said he could not remain a full-time University student, chairman of the party and run for the mayor. With his campaign for the mayoralty eliminated, he said he can now concentrate on the election campaigns of Hall and Boyle.

To get their names on the ballot, the Consumer Party candidates must circulate a petition and 10 people registered in the Consumer Party must sign it.

Mason expects the party to be successful in the elections.

"The way I see it, the people want a Consumer Party," he said. "We're trying to introduce a voice of reason into the system. Economic democracy is probably our basic theme and we believe the economy ought to have democratic restraints. There should be social input. We represent an interest group, but we're a series of interest groups."

But since the Consumer Party candidates are not as well known as some of the other candidates vying for office, the party must begin at grass roots level, Hall said. The party's first goal is to receive 5 percent of the vote in the municipal election, which would give the party automatic ballot status. This can only be achieved through a vigorous effort to increase the party's membership, he said.

Reformist party

The Consumer Party is a fairly typical, reformist party, King said. Such parties have never succeeded because people are frightened by ideologies, he said.

However, state Representative Gregg L. Cunningham, R-Centre of the Consumer Party tends to encourage people to become involved politically who might otherwise sit on the bench. I think it appeals primarily to people on the political left. Only time will tell what lies ahead for the Consumer Party.

Some of the pitfalls and shortcomings facing the party, Cunningham said, are the difficulty it has recruiting members, its politically left position and its appeal mostly to young voters.

"There's no doubt that the campus (Penn State) and the borough are probably oriented to the left of the rest of the congressional district," Cunningham said.

Third parties

Third parties such as the Consumer Party always have a rough time. As O'Connor and Hall put it, the two-party system is too rigid to accommodate third-party influx.

"Third parties will arise," O'Connor said. "If they don't, they'll be created."

"It's difficult to start a third party," Michael King, University associate professor of political science, said. "All the electorates in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and State College. The State College chapter was founded in May 1980. Ortenberg is taking the State College municipal elections very seriously."

"We see the State College municipal election as the turning point for the party," Ortenberg said. "We plan on doing well. We want to establish credibility to the community at large."

Ortenberg said the electorate has ingrained biases against the Consumer Party, so the party must definitely prove itself. "I don't think people see us as voters. I think when people meet us,

they're surprised to see us as a party with a platform. The party is against building more parking lots in State College. It also proposes full funding of the Centre Area Transportation Authority, building a South Allen Street pedestrian mall between College and Beaver Avenues, easing landlord-tenant disputes and widening the sidewalks on Lege.

"The back the Consumer Party has to do isn't proposing policies, but implementing them," Addison said.

"Whenever you get a third party," he said, "historically, it plays a role. The role it plays is in regard to the type of conflict it raises. I know the community. He (Ortenberg) doesn't know the community against the third party," he said. "If it's not on a ballot every place, it risks becoming a regional party. The third party is a voice of concern. It's difficult to start a third party because they have to spend a lot of money on court battles."

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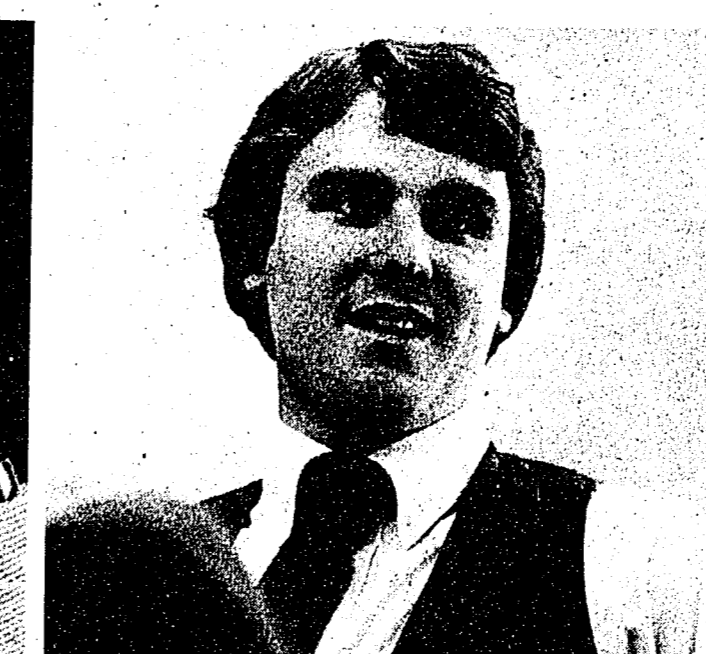
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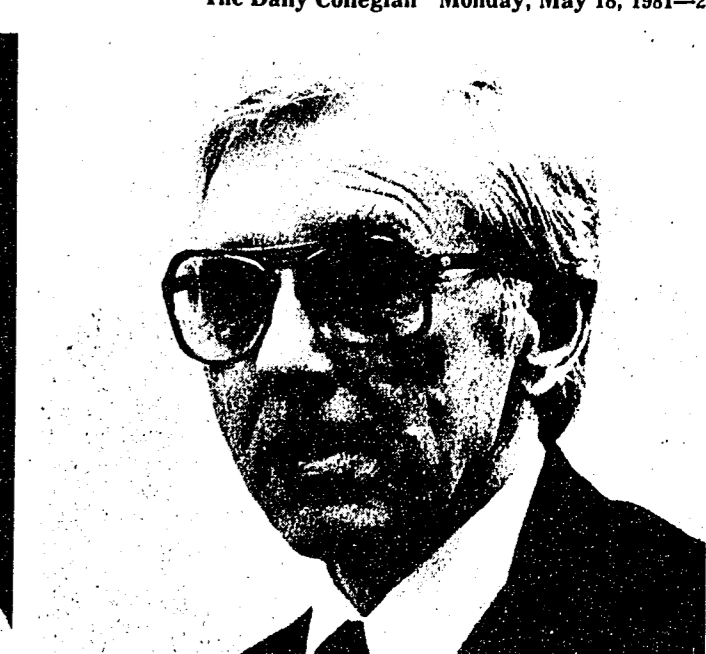
Gary A. Wiser



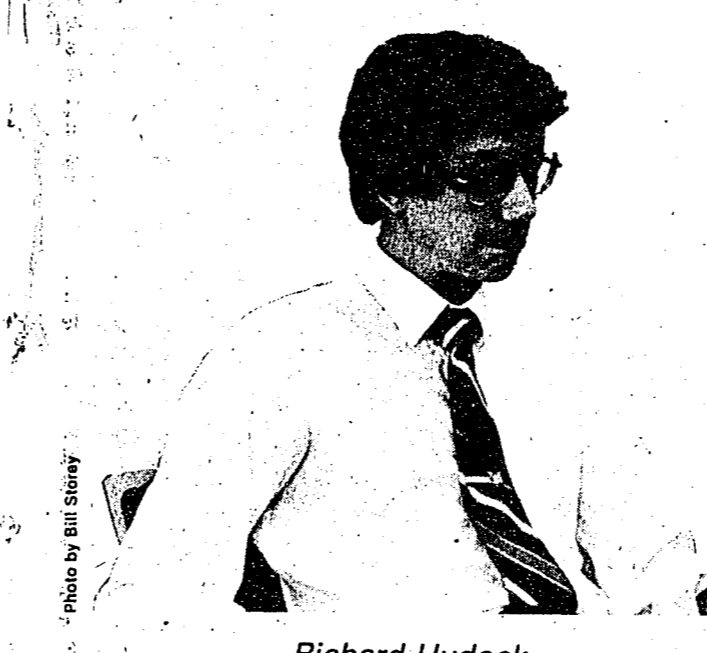
Greg Petrick



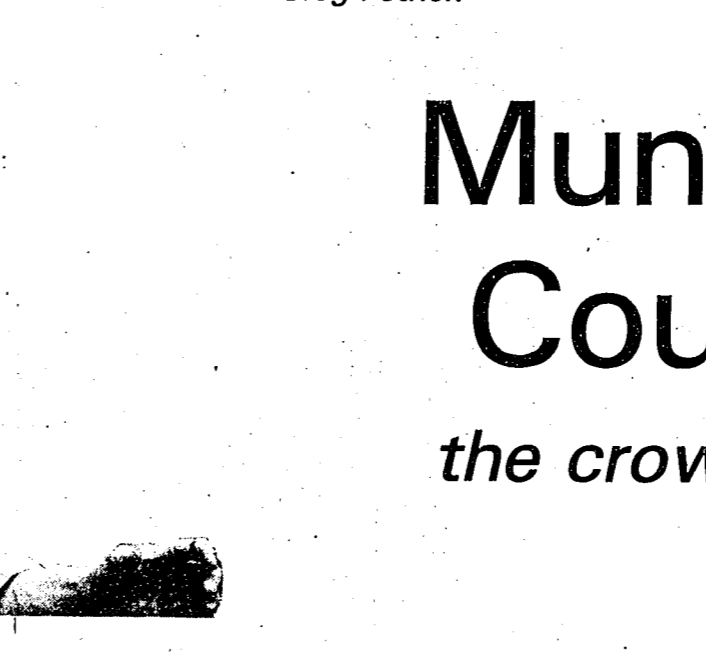
Felicia Lewis



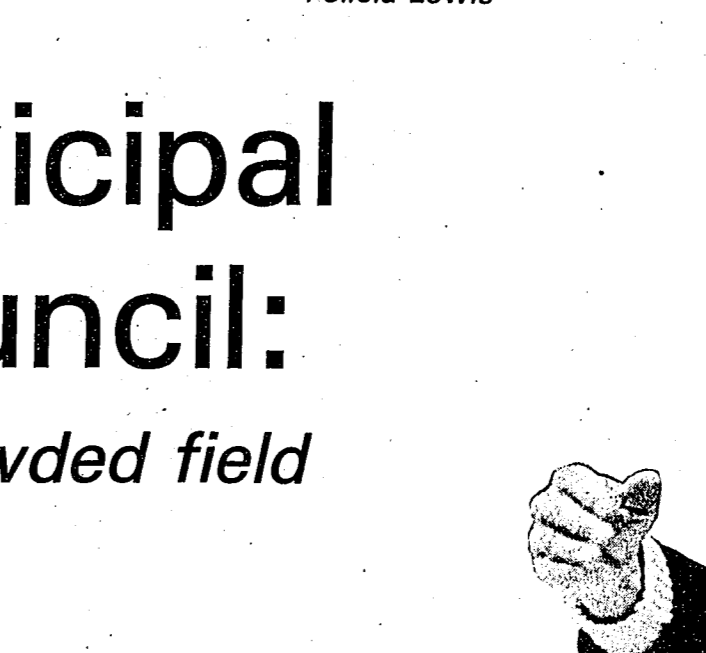
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Richard Hudock



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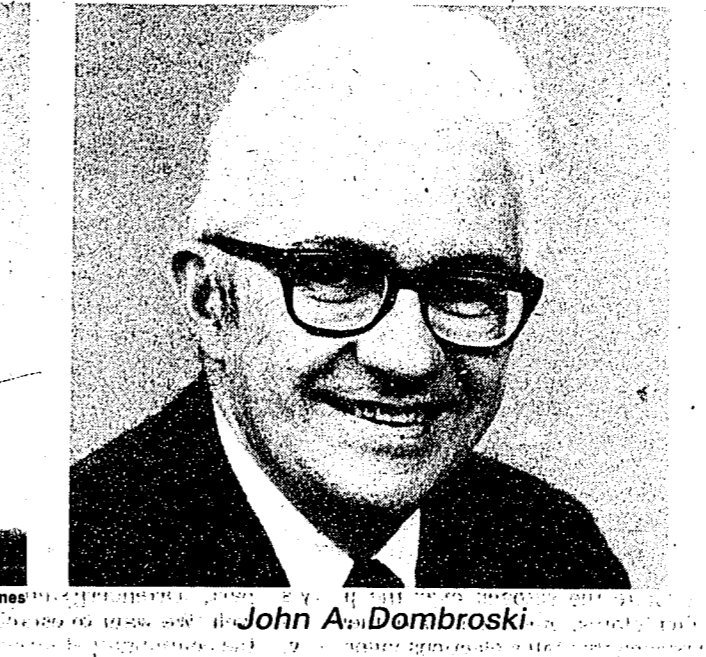
Mary-Jane Hovanec



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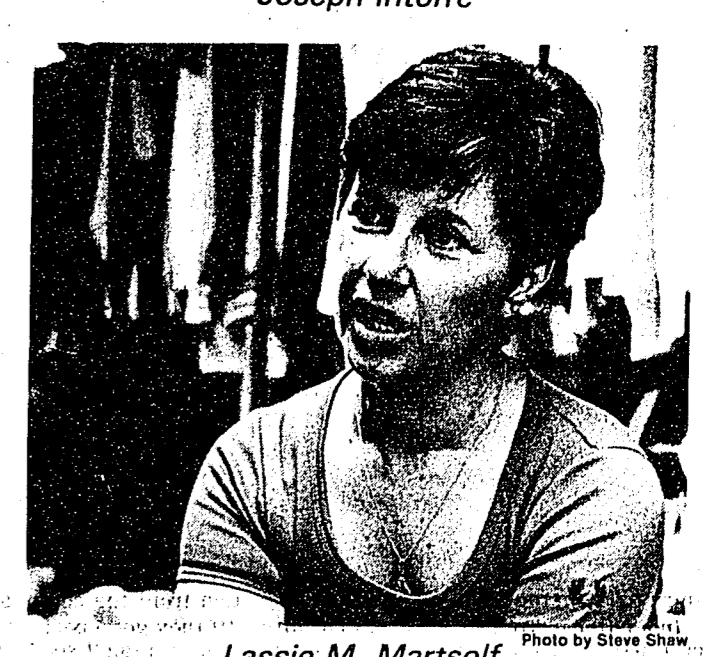
Kathleen E. Donohue



John A. Dombroski



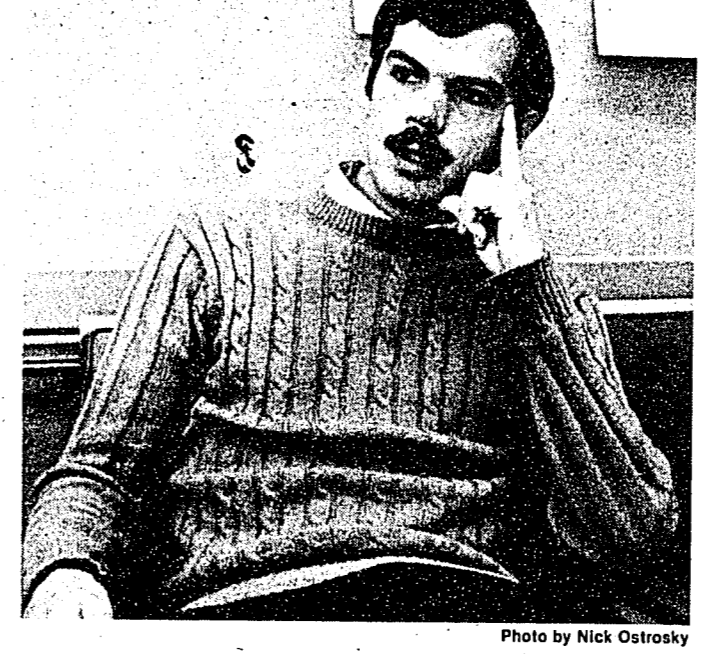
Mary-Jane Hovanec



Lassie M. Martsoff



Grove Spearly Jr.



Chris Hall



Ray Boyle



Dan Winand

Municipal Council: the crowded field

Editor's Note: This is a wrap-up story on the council was his concern over pedestrian and bicycle safety.

He said he would like to see South Allen Street blocked off, making it a mall, because he thinks the traffic in that area is a menace to pedestrians and bicyclists.

He also said he thought the mall concept would encourage rather than discourage business because the mall concept has appeal.

Another Consumer Party candidate, Ray Boyle (228-1144) and family studies, said energy concerns, including promotion of bicycles and discouragement of car use, are high on his list of important issues.

"A lot of the energy concerns have to do with the mall concept," Boyle said. "The municipality has been promoting the use of cars, not promoting bicycles and not standing behind their public transportation system. That's irresponsible in my eyes."

Drug abuse

An issue that does not have a clear answer among the candidates is whether the municipality should work on another drug paraphernalia ordinance to replace the one ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. District Court in Scranton.

Recently, an ordinance in Doylestown that banned the sale of paraphernalia was upheld in a Bucks County court.

Democratic candidate Richard Hudock (3rd-political science and foreign service) said he does not think this kind of ordinance is the proper approach to the drug problem. If money is to be spent fighting drug abuse, he said he would rather see the money which was spent for the defense of the ordinance be given to a trial basis.

Some candidates said they think the cab company is a waste of the taxpayer's money and that it should be sold.

Democratic candidate Grove Spearly Jr. said he does not think the municipality should be fighting drug abuse and not alcohol abuse.

Republican Dan Winand said, "The community is not looking at the whole problem by fighting drug abuse and not alcohol abuse."

He also said attacking the problem of drug abuse at the paraphernalia level was to treat a symptom and not the problem.

Another Republican, Mary-Jane Hovanec, also said alcohol abuse was at least as serious as drug abuse.

She also said the drug paraphernalia ordinance was not the solution to the drug problem.

"At least at the college level, people laugh at it," Hovanec said. "It's easy to get a hold of paraphernalia; you can make it yourself."

Some candidates including Lewis and Democrat Greg Petrick said they think the ordinance could be better handled on the state level.

Republican candidate Gary Wiser said the ordinance should be handled on the local level if possible.

"That's the level that has its ear to the ground," Wiser said. "That's the level that can respond best."

Patrick said he thinks the takeover was necessary because the municipality was in danger of losing all service, but he does not see the municipally owned system as a permanent solution.

Both incumbents said they would like to see the municipality keep the cabs.

Lewis and Deeslie both said that paratransit rights, defined as any ridership not regularly scheduled including handicapped and elderly, are an important factor in retaining the cabs.

Taxi service

The candidates also disagree about what to do with the municipally owned taxi cab company.

The municipality bought the Centre Cab Co. from private owners in 1979 and turned its operation over to the Centre Area Transportation Authority for management. Because the cabs were operating at a deficit, CATA asked to be relieved of responsibility for the system. The municipality then voted to retain the company for at least another year on a trial basis.

Some candidates said they think the cab company is a waste of the taxpayer's money and that it should be sold.

Democratic candidate Rosemarie Penka called the taxi system a losing proposition and said she would like to see the municipality get rid of the service.

Dombroski said he thinks the cab company was an example of inefficient management by the municipality and would like to see it sold.

Republican Lassie Martsoff said that if the municipality has to make a choice between running the cabs or losing the system, she would rather that the municipality retain the system, though she would prefer to see the cab company operated by private owners.

Democratic candidate Grove Spearly Jr. said he does not think the municipality should be in a business that can be handled by private enterprise and it should get out of the operation as soon as possible.

Student involvement

Most of the candidates also agreed that University students can have an active role in local government.

A prime proponent of the belief that students can be active in government is Hudock, himself a student.

"There are a lot of intelligent students here," Hudock said. "Some of the most hard-working people are the ones that are here four years. I hope by my running, we're sparking some interest."

Patrick also said he advocates more student involvement in local government.

"The students make up a good deal of the population; the decisions affect them, too," Patrick said. "We need to get student population involved in borough government."

Republican candidate Kathleen Donohue, however, said she does not think students should be elected to the council because they may have trouble fulfilling a full four-year council term.

"A lot of people's entire business and future is tied up here," Donohue said. "Most of the students are here for four years and then get out. Unless you are elected as soon as you get here, I don't see how you can serve a full term."

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Inflation concerns

Some of the candidates have said they were concerned, though, that inflation will hinder the amount of services the council can provide, and more long-range planning is now needed.

Republican candidate John A. Dombroski said, "We need to take a look at what we're spending money for. We need to get maximum benefits from the money we spend. We need a long-range planner. We have to take a long look at things before we spend money or raise taxes."

Democratic incumbent candidate Felicia Lewis said, "It may be difficult to maintain the level of quality State College has come to take for granted (with inflation). We must be concerned for public safety in terms of lighting and police services. The use of pedestrian ways should also be encouraged."

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