



The Power of Grass-Roots Organizing

Guest Editorial: by Noel Levy

THE INITIAL SIGN that our First Amendment rights were in peril from the Baltimore County Council was an email from a friend of mine in mid-March. Then I saw the article he was referencing, a small blurb in the *Baltimore Sun*. Basically, Ordinance 2906 would ban any kind of campaign signs on private property until 30 days before the Primary election, this year. Later, this was changed to 45 days before the Primary election, but it didn't matter. We still have a Constitution in this country, and Maryland is still part of the Union and subject to that Constitution. Any restriction on our right to display political signage in our front yards in Baltimore County, or anywhere else in these United States, is blatantly unconstitutional.

Why restrict campaign signs in Baltimore County, why now? We will probably never know the real answer to that question. But this is an election year, and any repression of political campaigning here in Baltimore County helps our incumbent office holders, and hurts anyone running for a major office who is not from Baltimore city or Baltimore County. This ordinance would have had a profound impact on the gubernatorial race, the U.S. Senate race, and the 3rd District Congressional race.

So we got organized right away. I called many of my friends from Citizens for Property Rights, the group that defeated Senate Bill 509 by referendum in 2000. (Senate Bill 509 was a scheme to pervert the laws of condemnation and eminent domain, and use County government to seize homes and small businesses in Essex, Middle River and Randallstown, turning that property over to developers. We petitioned it to referendum, and it went down to defeat on the November ballot by nearly 70% of the vote. Funny, Senate Bill 509 sailed through the General Assembly and was signed into law by Governor Glendening just a few months earlier.) I called and emailed my friends at Democracy for Baltimore, a group made up of many of the Howard Dean supporters from 2004, plus many of the Kerry/Edwards volunteers. They contacted their friends in the Green Party. We contacted Common



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Cause, the League of Women Voters, and the American Civil Liberties Union. All of these groups generated emails and phone calls into the offices of our County Council. Most councilmen were hearing from constituents they had not heard from before. Thankfully, most of our folks were seasoned veterans, having spent the last three months lobbying their Delegates and Senators in Annapolis on the Clean Air bill, Fair Share Health Care, Voter Verified Paper Ballots, and the Marriage Amendment.

It needs to be said here that the Baltimore County Council meets on Monday nights, before the public, and it is televised. Most meetings only last about a half hour. Most of the business that is conducted consists of the passage of minor ordinances that are exceptions to density, set back, height, zoning or other restrictions that are inconvenient to some plan a developer is proposing in one corner of the County or another. I testified at the end of the Council meeting against Ordinance 2906, and spoke against it at the "Work Session" the next week. Our "Work Session" is a more informal County Council meeting, in a room with comfortable chairs instead of the church pews in the main Council chambers. The meetings last longer, and substantive issues are actually examined, although not usually in great depth.

And then a wonderful thing happened: the main co-sponsor of Ordinance 2906 withdrew it, right before the Council meeting where it was on the agenda for a final vote. Someone from the County Executive's office proclaimed that the idea of restricting political campaign signs from private property was dead, and it was withdrawn because it didn't have the votes to pass. Chalk up another win for the people, and keep those calls, cards and emails coming!

Summing it up, our elected officials seem to lose their way with some regularity these days, and they need us to remind them of why they are in office, and what they are supposed to be doing while they are holding that office. ★

"Chalk up another win for the people . . ."