

Local Tea Partiers defy labels

Jill Terreri • Staff writer • April 15, 2010

They don't throw bricks. They worry about interlopers out to make them look bad. They don't believe any congressmen were spit upon or called the N-word in the hours before the health care vote. They don't take their orders from Sarah Palin, and they're not all white.

Members of Tea Party groups in the Rochester region say they are drawn together by conservative values, a strict interpretation of the Constitution, strong patriotism, and fear of an ever-growing deficit and government encroachment on their rights.

They share expenses for costs such as rally permits. And while they're typically affiliated with various other groups, they come together under the Tea Party banner.

Today, they will be out in force at their second Tax Day rally, downtown at Genesee Crossroads Park and at hundreds of locations nationwide. Last year's rally in Rochester drew a crowd estimated at between 500 and 1,000 people.

Members say their numbers have grown since then, boosted in part by the health care vote taken by Congress in March.

The Tea Party movement began in part in response to the bank bailout of 2008, though local groups have formed more recently, such as the one in Victor, which has been around for six months. The

"Tea" is sometimes used as an acronym for "Taxed Enough Already."

University of Rochester senior Gabriel Sukenik, who plans to attend today's rally, described the Tea Party as "a loose affiliation of people who are sick of government intrusion."

No clear numbers of their ranks nationally are available; even estimates are difficult because the movement draws from so many other grass-roots conservative groups.

Some members who aren't heading downtown today are taking a bus to Washington, D.C., for a national rally and a meeting with Republican congressional candidate Tom Reed of Corning.

"They're extremely worried, they're downright scared of where we're going as a nation, and rightfully so," said Reed, who has courted their support.

On the eve of what could be their largest rally yet, Tea Party members from across the country are gaining attention. A USA Today/Gallup poll taken March 26-28 found that 28 percent of adults in the United States support the movement and 26 percent oppose it.

"The whole point is government is getting too big, government is getting too expensive," said Ken Witherow of Livonia, Livingston County, who attended a Tea Party meeting last week at the Four Point Rod and Gun Club in Chili.

Phillips Stevens Jr., an associate professor of anthropology at the University at Buffalo, said it's not unusual for groups like the Tea Party to form during economic downturns.

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But, he added, "as people became more comfortable in their own lives, their interest in these organized, or disorganized, protest groups, declined."

Tea Party members, however, expect their group to stay — and grow.

"I think it's a very snowball thing that's going on," said Mike Deming of Brighton, who is helping to organize the rally.

Courting support

The Tea Party includes members from a number of groups. Campaign for Liberty — Sukenik coordinates the UR chapter — is closely aligned with former presidential candidate Ron Paul. We Surround Them, with its nine principles and 12 values, harks back to the patriotic mood on Sept. 12, 2001, the day after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. And Freedom Works is chaired by former House majority leader and lobbyist Dick Armey. We Surround Rochester, the local chapter, counts more than 1,000 members, according to the group's site on MeetUp.com.

Unlike organized political parties, the loose affiliation of Tea Party activists can make the group unpredictable, and some of their rally signs can be controversial at best, racist at worst. The group can also attract negative attention, though local group members complained that the most extreme people who show up at rallies get the most notice.

Even U.S. Sen. Scott Brown, whose unlikely January victory as a Republican in Massachusetts was helped along by the Tea Party movement, declined to speak at the group's rally in Boston on Wednesday. The group's impact in the fall elections will be closely watched.

Unlike others who court the group's support, Rep. Chris Lee, R-Clarence, Erie County, is well-financed and popular in his party.

Lee addressed Tea Partiers during the health care debate on Capitol Hill and held the "kill" sign when three members of Congress lined up with signs saying, "Kill the Bill."

"People should be able to express their concerns," Lee said when asked about the sign. "That bill is the wrong bill. We are now stuck with it."

Tea Party members say for the first time that they will vet candidates, and they have had a steady stream of politicians who have spoken at their meetings, including Reed, U.S. Senate candidate Joe DiGuardi and gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino — all Republicans.

Paladino, a real estate developer who was courted to run by Tea Party activists in Erie County, is under fire for e-mail messages he forwarded that contained racist and sexually explicit material, including pornography containing bestiality. But he hasn't been abandoned by his local Tea Party supporters, although the national Tea Party Express movement has denounced him.

Paladino wasn't asked about the e-mails Monday during a meeting of the Finger Lakes Tea Party, said Sandy King, a spokesperson for the group.

"That's not where people's priorities are, over that petty stuff," King said.

A group of individuals

Members are usually political newcomers, but that's not universal. Steven Poyzer of Victor is chairman of the Ontario County Conservative Party, although he says he represents himself at Tea Party meetings.

Poyzer tells his fellow members not to become

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affiliated with a political party, lest they be "co-opted."

He said the group does not have a national leader, be it radio and TV personality Glenn Beck, Palin or anyone else.

"The day they name a national leader is the day I drop from the group," he said.

Rochester resident and mother of three Ayesha Kreutz started to become a conservative after listening to conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh.

Kreutz, who is scheduled to speak today at the Tea Party rally downtown, said her change of opinion happened gradually from her youth in the city's black community.

She now speaks out against the health care bill.

"That's the freedom of America, people can come together and say no, we're going to take it back," she said during a recent meeting in Chili.

When they're not planning demonstrations or checking candidates' platforms, Tea Party members get together to talk politics and read books. W. Cleon Skousen's *"The Five Thousand Year Leap,"* about the Constitution and the founding fathers, is a favorite.

They also develop close friendships.

"I care deeply about them," said Poyzer. "They're good, honest people."

Untrue labels

The movement has had its share of controversies, and local members blame the racist rhetoric on people who have infiltrated the group to make them look bad. They also reject violence as a way to spread their message and say extremists will latch on to any movement.

"We're getting labeled with these really derogatory things that are really untrue," Poyzer said.

Local members deny widely reported incidents over

the weekend of March 20, on the eve of the health care vote, in which Tea Party members were accused of spitting on Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, using racial epithets toward Rep. John Lewis and slurs toward Rep. Barney Frank, all Democrats. Congressional aides, however, confirmed these events with reporters.

Sukenik said he's watched videos of the event from all angles and the proof isn't there.

Local members have no problem talking about President Barack Obama's race and believe it helps him achieve his agenda.

Deming, who is also Monroe County coordinator of Campaign for Liberty, said Obama's policies are harming freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution.

"He's more dangerous to the Constitution and to our constitutional issues because he's not George Bush," Deming said. "He's black, so he's got the sympathy vote; he's automatically got a pass on a lot of stuff."

The Democratic National Committee declined to respond.

Local members say they will continue working in order to change the direction of the country and influence the political system, which they say has two parties that are too much alike.

President Bush and candidate Obama both campaigned to pass the bank bailout, said UR's

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Sukenik, who is from New Rochelle.

"People complain there's not enough bipartisanship," Sukenik said. "There's way too much bipartisanship."

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If you go

The Tax Day Tea Party rally will begin at 11:30 a.m. today at Genesee Crossroads Park along the Genesee River south of Andrews Street.

Who are they?

Tea Party supporters are:

- 49 percent Republican, 43 percent independent, 8 percent Democratic. U.S. adults are 28 percent Republican, 40 percent independent and 32 percent Democratic.
- 70 percent conservative, 22 percent moderate, 7 percent liberal. U.S. adults are 40 percent conservative, 38 percent moderate and 21 percent liberal.
- 55 percent men, 45 percent women. Nationally, 49 percent of adults are men, 51 percent are women.
- 19 percent make less than \$30,000 annually, 26 percent make between \$30,000 and \$49,999 and 55 percent make \$50,000 or above.
- 16 percent of supporters are between ages 18 and 29, 34 percent are between 30 and 49, 29 percent are between 50 and 64 and 21 percent are 65 and older. All age group percentages are within 2 percentage points of national figures.
- 79 percent are white people, slightly higher than the national average of 75 percent.
- 6 percent are black, lower than the national average of 11 percent.
- 49 percent are employed full time, slightly higher than the national average of 47 percent.

SOURCE: *USA Today*/Gallup poll, conducted March 26-28.

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