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In face of liberal government, irate conservatives speak up

Sussex County group SSCOR starts grass-roots effort to 'get the good people in'

By *DAN SHORTRIDGE*
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They attended anti-tax "tea parties" April 15, converged at the National Rifle Association's convention last month and formed grass-roots organizations across the country.

They are marching and protesting much like liberals did over the last decade. Many are anti-Obama, anti-tax, anti-gay marriage, pro-military and pro-gun.

"Conservatives right now feel sort of threatened in this country," said Joshua Dyck, an assistant professor of American politics at the State University of New York at Buffalo, who has researched the conservative movement and voting patterns. "A lot of conservatives have in some ways lost faith in what the [Republican] party itself is doing."

This uprising is evident in southern Delaware, the local edge of a nascent conservative activist movement against the Democratic administrations in Washington and Dover.

Known as the Sussex County Community Organized Regiment, a group of about 125 members has set its sights on the 2010 elections, aiming to take out liberal politicians. Recently, a core group of about 50 members gathered to talk strategy.

"I'm here because I'm angry," said Angel Clark, a Delaware Technical & Community College political science student, rattling off a list of complaints including the financial bailouts and what she calls wasted federal stimulus funding.

She pointed to the Rehoboth Beach boardwalk, which received \$7.5 million in stimulus money. "It was already functional -- it was fine," said Clark, who handles public relations for the group. "It makes no sense whatsoever."

At the group's most recent meeting last month at the American Legion post near Long Neck, members heard a legislative update from Nicole Theis, executive director of the Seaford-based Delaware Family Policy Council.

The two groups share many conservative values, Theis said, telling the SCCOR members: "You're on the right track."

A small group of politicians, including state Sen. Colin Bonini, R-Dover South; Sussex County Council President Vance Phillips, R-Laurel; and state Rep. John Atkins, D-Millsboro, have attended meetings. Their movement has been fueled in great part by Rehoboth-area talk radio station WGMD/92.7, known for its conservative leanings.

At the meeting, Eric Bodenweiser of Georgetown led a discussion of the 2010 elections, going over lists of candidates and potential candidates. Among those praised were Democrats -- Sen. Thurman Adams of Bridgeville and Bob Venables of Laurel -- and many Republicans.

One of their main targets is Rep. Pete Schwartzkopf, D-Rehoboth, the House majority leader and a key ally of Gov. Jack Markell.

"Somebody's going to have to step up and run against this fellow," said Bodenweiser, the group's chaplain, explaining that they're looking for "good, conservative, Godly people" to run for office and "get the bad people out and get the good people in."

SCCOR leaders say there are some misconceptions about the group -- one of which centers around its name and the use of the word "Regiment," which has militia-esque connotations, evoking a paramilitary organization hunkered down in a compound.

That's an image not dispelled by the group's logo, which features two old-fashioned rifles and the statement: "The Second Amendment is not a suggestion. It's a right!!"

Spreading the word

Bodenweiser said the idea of SCCOR as a militia is far from reality. The most recent meeting drew families with toddlers and gray-haired senior citizens, hardly ready to take up arms.

"We haven't started marching around in a field anywhere, and don't plan to," Bodenweiser said, chuckling. "That's not what we're about."

The name came from the desire to have an acronym -- pronounced "score" -- that easily comes to the lips, such as NASCAR or the community organizing coalition ACORN, Bodenweiser said.

"We were concerned that the word 'regiment' might scare people," he acknowledged. "But if you look up the word, the very first definition is 'governmental rule.'"

In an effort to expand their mission's reach, they're starting a political action committee under the direction of Greenwood-area resident Matt Opaliski, who ran against Adams in 2006 on the Independent Party of Delaware ticket, attracting 22 percent of the vote.

The PAC will be a separate entity, allowing supporters to spend and raise funds, print literature and perform issue advocacy.

Such a surge of activity is not unusual when one party or ideology is out of power, said Dyck.

"We didn't wake up after Obama was elected and all of a sudden we're a liberal nation," Dyck said. "There is still a significant presence in conservatism in the country, and it's going to find an outlet somewhere."

That's part of the plan -- to reach out to the broader community, not withdraw or secede, said Andrew Jackson, part of the leadership team and founder of a Seaford-based Internet marketing company.

He called for members to sign up and be organizers and points of contact in their local legislative districts, spreading information about the group and its work through other community organizations, booths at festivals and the like.

"We've got to knit together strong local communities," he said. "When we're not informed, the wrong people get into office, or people who don't share our values."
