

Year of the Status Quo

Democrats, schools and public transit lose at the polls

BY DOUG TRAPP

Across the country, in Ohio and in Cincinnati, Democrats are licking their wounds. Tristate fans of light rail will have to settle for buses for years to come. But Cincinnati Public Schools supporters have only just begun to fight.

That's how the 2002 elections are playing out.

School campaign isn't over

A \$480 million bond issue for the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) failed Nov. 5 by 611 votes. The bond remains the missing link in the \$985 million CPS Facilities Master Plan, a plan to rebuild or rehab almost all of the district's schools. The rest would come from a 23 percent state match.

The 4.89 mil bond would have cost the owner of a \$100,000 home \$143 annually.

But CPS isn't done yet. Unlike other urban school districts in Ohio, CPS has enough money to pay for the first part of the four-phase facilities plan. To keep the 10-year plan on its original schedule, it needs to pass the bond issue in May.

The Cincinnati Board of Education recently agreed to take the first of two necessary votes Jan. 13 to put the levy on the May ballot, according to Jan Leslie, CPS spokeswoman.

"In order to not cause any delay in the next segment, we need to pass a bond issue by the fall," Leslie says.

Leslie says the Ohio School Facilities Commission — the state agency overseeing the statewide push to update schools — isn't demanding CPS pass a levy for the whole facilities plan by August 2003, as some have said.

But CPS officials are concerned they will miss out on historically low interest rates. Every 1 percent increase adds \$70 million to the total project cost, and construction costs increase by an average of 3 or 4 percent each year, Leslie says.

Democrats lose big

The one thing Hamilton County Democrats could agree on during a Dec. 5 brainstorming session was that there was a lot of energy in the room.

"I think it was valuable from a standpoint there were a significant number of people in that room who care," says Dr. Jean Siebenaler, who won only 40 percent of the votes in her race for county commissioner against Republican Phil Heimlich.

No matter Democrats spent some of the energy beating each other up a bit. There's still palpable tension between Siebenaler and County Auditor Dusty Rhodes — perhaps the most conservative Democrat.

Siebenaler campaigned for light rail. Rhodes campaigned against it. That's the easiest difference to point out, but it's just the beginning.

Unlike longtime Democratic activist Jene Galvin — who called his friend Rhodes a "son of a bitch" at the meeting — Siebenaler hasn't talked to Rhodes since the election. She sat next to him during the Dec. 5 meeting but barely

THE YEAR



IN REVIEW

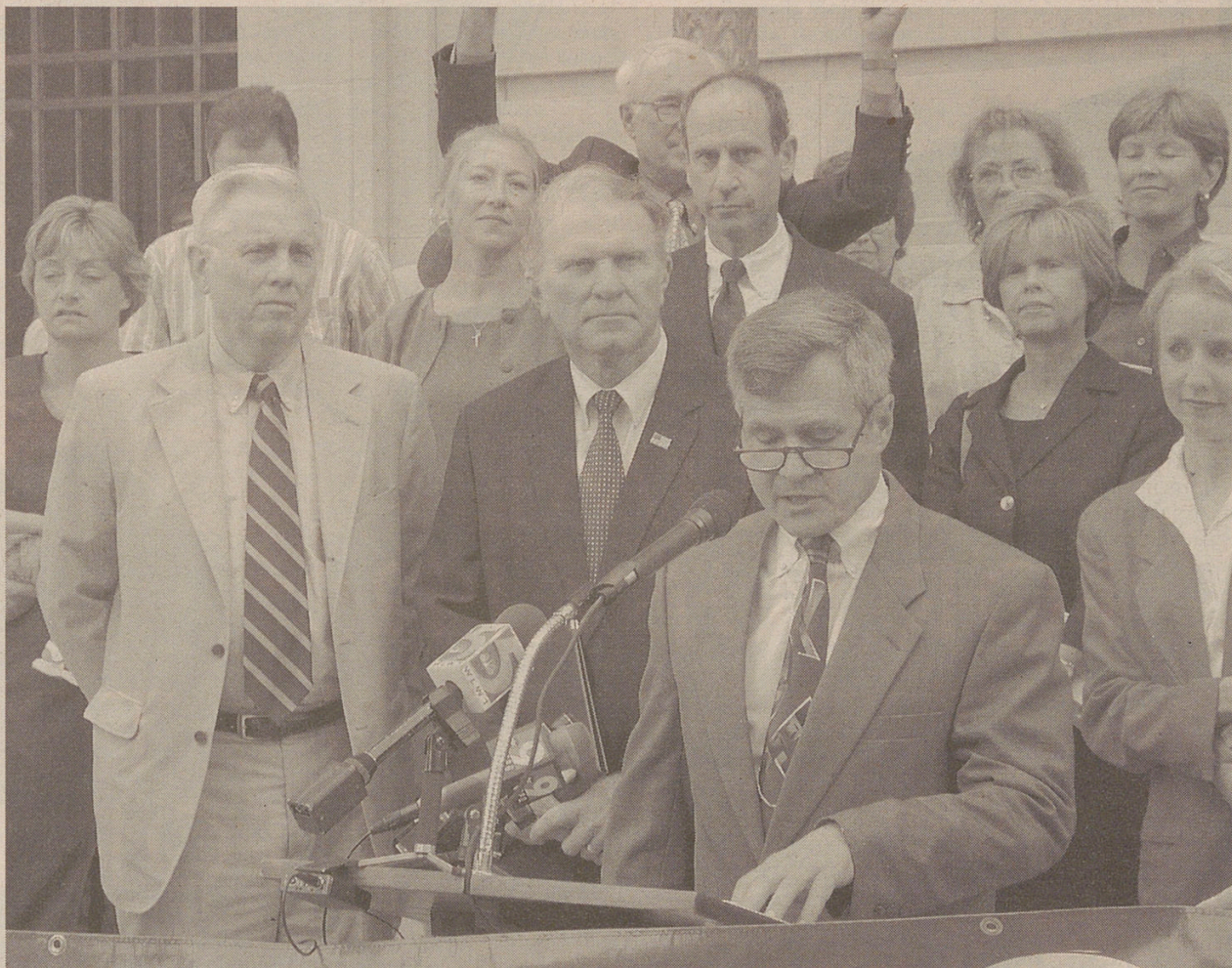


PHOTO: JYMI BOLDEN

Middle-aged white guys against progress: Stephan Louis of Alternatives to Light Rail speaks out against the transit tax, joined by (L-R) County Auditor Dusty Rhodes, U.S. Rep. Steve Chabot and Phil Heimlich.

looked his way. When asked about Rhodes, the usually talkative Siebenaler gets pretty quiet.

Attorney Bruce Whitman is heading back to private practice after being soundly defeated by Republican Fred Nelson for a seat on the Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas. The Ohio Supreme Court rejected Whitman's challenge to Nelson's qualifications. Whitman had argued Nelson hadn't practiced law in Ohio for five years, the statutory minimum.

The complaint first went through the Hamilton County Board of Elections, hung on a tie vote, then went to the Ohio Secretary of State's Office, then to the Ohio Supreme Court. But the high court didn't rule on the specific question; instead the justices said they didn't have jurisdiction to end Nelson's candidacy, so they dismissed the complaint.

"I think now it's up to the prosecutor or the attorney general under Ohio law," Nelson says.

Those officials are in charge of investigating candidates' qualifications after an election. Both, like Nelson, are Republicans.

Like Siebenaler, Whitman isn't faulting his campaign for his loss. Like Siebenaler, he raised about as much money as his opponent. But he says he learned a few things about our political system.

"I think I learned that the Board of Elections is a political body and not an agency," he says.

He also learned that suburban Hamilton County voters are very focused on safety, especially downtown safety.

"I must say I think that people are overly concerned about it," Whitman says.

Transit tax is a train wreck

But perhaps nothing took a bigger beating this fall than Issue 7, the proposed half-cent sales tax for a \$2.6 billion light rail network and expanded bus system.

A little more than 68 percent of county voters rejected the proposal, soundly ending a once-in-five-year opportunity to grab federal matching funds.

This year the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority (SORTA) is going to have a difficult time keeping Metro running at full speed. It's expecting cuts in both state and federal funding, according to spokeswoman Sallie Hilvers.

"It is going to be a budgetary crunch for us," she says.

The SORTA board hasn't even hinted at tackling any large projects at its first two meetings after the election, Hilvers says.

"There's no plan to go forward with a tax levy of any sort," she says.

There's talk of SouthBank, the Northern Kentucky economic development group, working on a riverfront streetcar line, and SORTA will open the Riverfront Transit Center under Second Street in March. But all other projects are on hold.

Metro might try some new bus routes, but that doesn't mean they're adding new buses.

SORTA might entertain its first general fare increase since 1993 if its budget really shrinks, Hilvers says. It's also facing contract negotiations with a union representing 700 drivers, mechanics and support personnel.

The long-term future of the MetroMoves light rail and bus expansion plan remains a big, open question. ©