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Little Old Liar From Pasadena

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The Little Old Liar From Pasadena: Can the Tea Party Elect Sean Baggett to the Local School Board?

Friday 8 April 2011
by: Peter Dreier, Truthout | Report

It is hardly surprising that many Tea Party-backed candidates espouse a variety of wacky ideas (think "birther" and "death panel"), but the Tea Party also has a habit of backing candidates with bizarre personal histories. One example was Christine O'Donnell, the Tea Party-backed Republican United States Senate candidate in Delaware whose checkered past - including flirtations with witchcraft, trouble with personal finances and distortions about her educational history - led voters last November to decide that she was not fit for office. But in some cases, especially in small cities and rural areas, where the local media don't pay much attention, the Tea Party can run a successful stealth campaign below the radar, targeting conservative voters who may not be aware of (or even care about) a candidate's troubling track record.

Political observers in Pasadena, a small city next to Los Angeles best known for the annual Rose Bowl parade and football game, are concerned that Sean Baggett, a Tea Party-backed candidate, may win a seat on the local school board because too few voters know about his history of drunk driving and other arrests and his persistent pattern of lies about his educational credentials and employment history.

In normal times, Baggett's defeat would likely be a slam dunk if his views and vices were known. Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) elections are nonpartisan, but voters are

generally liberals and moderates. They typically give overwhelmingly support to Democrats for Congress, state legislature and local offices; in 2008, Obama won the area by a huge margin. But before the March 8 preliminary election, voters knew almost nothing about Baggett's background. And these are not normal times.

In the preliminary race, Baggett managed to garner 35 percent of the vote - enough to get into a runoff against incumbent Tom Selinske, who won 47 percent of the vote in a three-candidate race. Overall, only 14 percent of registered voters (15,945 out of 114,514) cast ballots for one of the three candidates. The middle-of-the-road Selinske, a local businessperson, college teacher and longtime school volunteer, was caught off guard, assuming that the unknown Baggett could not mount a serious campaign. But the local Tea Party ran a quiet and effective effort on Baggett's behalf and is now energized to try to boost Baggett into the winner's circle in the April 19 runoff against Selinske. Voter turnout in the runoff is likely to be even smaller, which could favor Baggett if the Tea Party can mobilize its hardcore base and other conservatives.

The PUSD comprises three communities - Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre - with a combined population of about 200,000 residents. Two-thirds of the district's 19,000 students come from low-income families eligible for subsidized meals. The vast majority of students are Latino and African- American. Compared with whites, especially white conservatives, Latino and African voters generally have lower turnout rates.

With Baggett in the school board runoff, the Tea Party is actively recruiting members from cities outside the PUSD district to work on his campaign. "Help is needed for phone banking for Sean Baggett's runoff election," proclaimed an email from a local Tea Party activist. "I know he's not in your district, but this is a very strategic campaign for TEAPAC.... Whoever wins the runoff will tip the board one way or the other." The goal, according to the email, is the "shift of the balance of power in the school system over to conservatives."

Mike Alexander, the head of the local Tea Party, has contributed funds [3] to Baggett's campaign and, in interviews, indicated the Tea Party's support for Baggett. Alexander explained to the Pasadena Star-News that the Tea Party has an advantage in an off-year election with low voter turnout. "Our efforts to go after conservative voters was much easier," he said [4], referring to the Baggett campaign.

None of Baggett's baggage was known to the voters during the preliminary election, in large part because neither of the city's local newspapers - the daily Pasadena Star-News and the free Pasadena Weekly - bothered to investigate the unknown candidate. Since the March 8 preliminary race, however, both papers have published stories with damaging, though incomplete, information about Baggett's history of lies, half-truths, and legal and financial problems. But neither paper has significant readership in the area, which is dominated by The Los Angeles Times; The Times has so far has ignored the Pasadena story. In a race where fewer than 15 percent of voters are likely to turn out and where few voters have any direct connection to the public schools, it is especially likely that a small group of highly motivated voters could determine the outcome.

Stunned by Baggett's showing in the preliminary race, Selinske has ratcheted up his runoff campaign, enlisting more volunteers, raising more money and sending out more mailers. Selinske's supporters are hoping that the growing evidence of Baggett's problems with the

law and with the truth will reach, and shock, enough voters into going to the polls (or mailing absentee ballots) to overcome the Tea Party's zealous pro-Baggett operation.

Much of what both Pasadena papers reported about Baggett was uncovered by Larry O'Brien, a private investigator whose children attend PUSD schools.

The Star-News first exposed Baggett's arrest record on March 23 in a story headlined, "Candidate's past becomes issue in PUSD race," [5]but the story barely touched the surface of the long list of Baggett's ethical and legal lapses that O'Brien uncovered and provided the paper, said O'Brien. The Star-News has not written about the Baggett controversy since that initial story.

A few days later, in a story [6] titled "Wanted: Sean J. Baggett," the Pasadena Weekly exposed more of Baggett's problems with the law and with the truth. "Police are urging Pasadena Board of Education candidate Sean J. Baggett to surrender on a $30,000 bench warrant stemming from a 2008 arrest on suspicion of drunken driving and subsequent conviction for reckless driving," the Weekly reported. That day, Baggett posted a comment on the paper's web site insisting that, "there is NO outstanding warrant." What Baggett failed to mention was that the warrant was recalled that day only after he surrendered and paid part of the fine. The Weekly later reported [7]: "Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Collette Serio ruled Sean J. Baggett violated his probation by not paying the $1,486 fine - part of a plea agreement on a May 2008 drunken driving offense in which Baggett was ultimately found guilty of reckless driving."

The Weekly also reported [8] that, "The outstanding warrant is but the latest in a series of personal run-ins that the 39-year-old Baggett has had with police and prosecutors since the early 1990s, offenses that include driving under the influence and petty theft." These include a 2006 charge of public urination and defecating in public; a 2008 DUI arrest and failure to make payments on the fine levied for the reckless driving charge he plead to; and a San Diego civil judge's December 2008 order for him to pay a finance company nearly $14,000, according to court documents - the judgment appears to still be unsatisfied.

According to [7] the Weekly: "During the March 8 election campaign, a reporter asked Baggett to his face if he had ever been arrested or charged with a crime, and Baggett answered no. The Weekly asks that question of all candidates for public office."

Baggett's lies about his arrest record are only the tip of the iceberg according to the local papers and others knowledgeable about the candidate and his campaign.

For example, on his campaign and Facebook web sites - both of which he recently took down - Baggett claimed to have earned a masters degree in education from the University of California San Diego (UCSD) in 2000. O'Brien contacted the university and uncovered that Baggett did not attend and does not have a degree from the prestigious university.

During the campaign, at various public events and on his web sites, Baggett claimed to be a "faculty" member at Cal Tech and Pasadena City College, both high-profile local institutions. For example, speaking at a PUSD board meeting on August 24, 2010, Baggett said, "I am a faculty at PCC and adjunct professor at Cal Tech," as caught on the video of that meeting [9]. On his web site, Baggett claimed that he has been an "adjunct faculty" member at PCC from "2004-present." In fact, Baggett has never been on the PCC

faculty in any capacity. Years ago, he was once an "unclassified stipend employee" at PCC, making only $1,000 for 10 months to work with the track team, according to a PCC official.

Similarly, during the campaign, at various public events and on his web sites, Baggett claimed to be on the "faculty" of Cal Tech, one of the nation's most renowned science and engineering institutions, located in Pasadena. This claim, too, is a lie. Instead, Baggett has been a volunteer working with the Cal Tech track team.

On his campaign web site, Baggett also claimed to be an "adjunct professor" at California State University Sacramento from "September 2004-present." His web site said that Baggett is "Currently teaching EDLP 204 (Educational Leaders Role in Special Education). This graduate-level course is designed to prepare future administrators in all aspects of funding, compliance and proper implementation of special education services." Officials in the department at the university revealed that Baggett taught that course twice, during the spring 2005 and fall 2005 semesters, but that he has not taught at Cal State-Sacramento since then.

Last week, voters in the PUSD area received a mailer from the Baggett campaign claiming that he is the "Teacher's Choice." The United Teachers of Pasadena (UTP), the local teachers' union, immediately issued a press release calling the Baggett mailing "deceptive." Quoted in the press release, UTP President Alvin Nash said: "Pasadena teachers have not endorsed Sean Baggett in this race. We are disappointed that someone seeking to help lead a school district and be a role model for the students of Pasadena, Sierra Madre, and Altadena would so clearly mislead voters." UTP, which has about 1,000 members, has not endorsed any candidate in this race. So far neither the Star-News nor the Weekly have reported on UTP's accusations.

In addition to the fabricated masters in education from UCSD, Baggett's own teaching experience is something of a mystery. His web site claimed that he was "San Diego County Office of Education/Juvenile Court and Community Schools, Teacher of the Year, 2001," but according to O'Brien, who spoke to an official with the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), this is another one of Baggett's falsehoods. An email confirmation from the SDCOE indicated that the Juvenile Court and Community School "have no records to indicate that he was an SDCOE/JCCS TOY [Teacher of the Year] in 2001 or otherwise."

Another scandal regarding Baggett surfaced last month with regard to his job teaching special needs students at Soledad Enrichment Academy, a publicly funded charter school in Los Angeles. One of Baggett's students working on his campaign is being investigated for committing a hate crime for allegedly leaving a message interpreted as a death threat against a gay couple living in Pasadena before the March 8 preliminary election. According to the Weekly [10], "Stephen Lipira received a phone call in which the caller left a message identifying himself as someone working for Sean 'Faggot' and asking for his vote. The caller later said that he knew where Lipira's home was located and that he would 'blow it up,' before ending the call by saying 'I will kill you,' according to Lipira and Pasadena police officials."

Lipira's caller identification showed the call as originating from Soledad Enrichment Academy. The student confessed to making the call. Baggett denied knowledge of the call, but acknowledged that he used students at the school as volunteers to make

campaign calls. Baggett apparently provided the students with a script and phone numbers, but did not supervise them while they were making the calls on his behalf.

According to informants, it is illegal to use phones at publicly funded schools as part of a political campaign, an offense that no news outlet has yet reported on or investigated.

California's local school districts are primarily funded by the state, which ranks close to the bottom in terms of per-student spending on public schools. PUSD, like other urban districts, has been rocked by severe state budget cuts in recent years, leading to teacher layoffs and school closures. Despite this disadvantage, PUSD has made steady, positive progress in the past five years - including significant improvements in test scores [11] - under the leadership of Superintendent Edwin Diaz. (Selinske was school board president during part of Diaz's tenure). But Diaz recently announced that, after four years on the job, he is retiring in August, so the new school board's first responsibility will be to hire his replacement.

The stakes in this race are high because the seven-member PUSD board is split and a Baggett victory could tip the balance. A majority of school board members have backed Superintendent Diaz's management, budget and curricular reforms, but the board includes two members - Scott Phelps and Ramon Miramontes, who have opposed Diaz and sought to micromanage the district and who now back Baggett - and a newly elected member, Kim Kenne, whose loyalties are still untested but who donated $2,000 to Baggett during the preliminary race.

PUSD mostly serves low-income students. The district experienced middle-class (and mostly white) flight in the 1970's as a result of school busing. Although the number of middle-class students in the district has been gradually increasing in recent years, about one-third of the students in the PUSD area still attend private schools, one of the highest proportions in the nation.

Since most voters don't have children in public school - their kids have already graduated or they attend private school - they know little about the realities of PUSD. Negative stereotypes persist about the public schools, fueled for years by local newspapers, real estate agents and right-wing bloggers, despite the steady progress in recent years.

Few people in Pasadena's educational circles had heard of Baggett when he announced his candidacy for school board last year. During the campaign, especially at candidate forums, Baggett has shown little knowledge about the PUSD budget or programs, but he was quickly embraced and endorsed by the Pasadena Patriots, the local affiliate of the Tea Party, although Baggett denies being a Tea Party member himself. On February 12, Baggett attended a meet-and-greet event for his campaign, sponsored by the Tea Party and held at the home of Edna Jones, a local Tea Party activist. The event was prominently promoted for weeks in advance on the local Tea Party web site. Amy Ellison, a local Tea Party activist and Baggett's campaign media coordinator, is listed on his campaign document [12] (available on the city clerk's web site) as getting paid by his campaign.

Baggett's opponent Selinske was elected to the school board in 2007 after spending more than a decade as an active volunteer on behalf of public school students. He was chair of the school site council at Longfellow Elementary School, where his children attended school, was a leader of John Muir High School's Mustangs on the Move booster program, chaired the Partnership for Children, Family and Youth (2000-2005), and served on the

board (1997-2006) and as president for three years of the Pasadena Educational Foundation, which raises money for PUSD programs, teachers and college scholarships. He is the founder of the Pasadena City College Flea Market, which has generated over $1.5 million in support of student scholarships and activities.

Selinske, a moderate Republican, has been endorsed by many PUSD parents, civic leaders and elected officials, including Democrats, Republicans and independents, as well as the Teamsters and other unions, ACT (the local liberal political action group), Asociacion de Padres de Pasadena Luchando por La Educacion (Pasadena Parent Association Advocating for Equitable Education), Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff, State Senator Carol Liu, Assembly member Anthony Portantino, the mayors of Pasadena and Sierra Madre, most Pasadena City Council members and the head of the local unit of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In contrast, as of last week, the endorsement page on Baggett's campaign web site was totally empty.

Not surprisingly, Baggett doesn't include the Tea Party's endorsement on his web site. The group's support helps him with hardcore conservatives but could hurt him with moderates and independents in the nonpartisan school board race.

The Tea Party is as much a mood as a movement. Nationwide, fewer than 20 percent of Americans support the Tea Party, according to polls sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. It has more followers than active members. The ability of local Tea Party affiliates to mobilize those followers varies widely. The Tea Party's influence is greatest within the Republican Party, often won by running candidates within the GOP primaries, but Tea Party candidates often seem too extreme for moderate and independent voters. As a result, while some politicians enthusiastically embrace the Tea Party support, many others, like Baggett, prefer the stealth approach, rejecting any official affiliation with the right-wing zealots but counting on their support on election day.

[13]

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