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LOCAL NEWS

Tallying who's the most Democratic of them all

By **Bernie Smith / Staff Writer**
Tuesday, June 8, 2004

Michael Sales, moderator of the Ward 5 Democratic Committee meeting, sat down beside a piano in Elizabeth Cody's living room on Chestnut Street Sunday night, microphone in hand, and smiled at the NewTV camera pointed at him from the opposite corner of the room.

"We're doing our part here in West Newton to keep democracy alive," Sales said at the meeting's commencement.

But the life of the Democratic Party itself may have been a more apt description.

The meeting, which included state Rep. Ruth Balser and Alderman Brian Yates, was convened to hear the pros and cons of a "platform support card," a new initiative that would measure how "Democratic" some legislators are. The proposal would compare a handful of "representative" votes from every Democratic legislator against the stated party position, as set forth in party platform, a document written every four years that encapsulates the Massachusetts Democrat's philosophy on a range of issues.

The meeting featured two guest speakers, Jesse Gordon and Rebekah Gewirtz, members of the Progressive Democrats of Somerville who originally proposed the idea at last year's state convention.

The proposal has undergone significant changes since then - their initial draft proposed "rating" legislators by how often they voted in line with party's position. But the principle behind it remained the same - by publicizing legislator's records, the Democratic Party could attract an increasingly disenfranchised constituency: young, progressive independents.

"People on the outside can't see the difference [between] Democrats and Republicans," Gewirtz told the 20 or so people crowded in the room. "We should be getting people excited about the Democratic Party, Gewirtz said, but voters needed to see what separates the parties.

Their idea has been met with resistance by some inside the state Democratic Party, who fear the proposal, while well-intentioned, had the potential to be misused.

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Martina Jackson, the chairwoman of the Newton Democratic City Committee, said that while she supports the idea, some of the kinks have yet to be worked out.

Jackson said determining who will choose which of the 4,000 bills introduced in the House each year will be included in the platform support card, is an important factor yet to be hammered out. Her fear, she says, is that members of one end of the party's ideological gamut will be ranking every legislator by their own standards.

"It's as if we're asking one spectrum of the party to develop a score card for the entire group," Jackson told the group.

Trellis Stepter, chairman of the Cambridge Democratic City Committee, also attended the meeting to advise a more deliberate approach to the initiative's implementation. The Democratic State Committee has agreed to form a Platform Support Card subcommittee, Stepter said, which would flesh out some of the remaining issues. Once the subcommittee has completed its work, Stepter said the proposal would be brought before the Democratic State Committee, who would be charged with implementing it.

Jackson said she feels Gordon and Gewirtz are jumping the gun by pushing for the proposal too quickly. "That isn't the way the party is set up. It isn't up to them [Gordon and Gewirtz]. It has to go to a committee," Jackson said.

But Gewirtz said she's become frustrated with the amount of time that has passed. Only three of the proposed seven subcommittee members - Gewirtz, Stepter and former legislative aide Mark Mulgay - had so far been named.

"We are not opposed to process," Gewirtz said. "Our concern is this was passed in June 2003, and still we have yet to have a subcommittee meeting. This isn't about subverting process. We just want to get it done."

Jackson and Stepter later told the TAB they hope to name the final of the subcommittee member sometime in the next two weeks, and hold the first meeting shortly thereafter.

The debate became heated at times, and some Ward 5 members urged solidarity among Democratic activists. Alderman Yates compared the sparring to a "shootout in a lifeboat."

Newton state legislators, meanwhile, were split on their support of the proposal. While they said their own votes are likely to reflect the position of the party platform closely, Democrats from other districts may be unfairly hurt, based upon which votes are selected for the support card and which ones aren't.

"We all come from different kinds of communities," said state Rep. Kay Kahn, who said she does not support the proposal in principle. "A Democrat from Newton is going to look different from a Democrat from other communities," she said.

State Senator Cynthia Creem, meanwhile, said she wanted to see the end proposal before offering an endorsement. "I'm waiting to see where they [the Democratic State Committee] come out on the issue," Creem said.

Rep. Balser, however, offered careful support. "I support the process that I heard last night said Balser, of the Sunday night meeting. "The process is yielding some very positive results."

"I am glad the state party is taking this proposal and implementing it in a very cautious way Balser said. "It's happening. If it's going to happen, it should happen well."

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