

Threat thwarted

The undefeated Mercy basketball team faced its toughest test of the season, emerging with a 57-53 win over Fairport. Page 9.



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Catholics lobby for wide, varied agenda

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

A group of Rochester Catholics recently demonstrated the ideal way to lobby a politician, according to New York State Sen. John D. Perry.

The lobbyists — a five-member team from the Rochester diocese — pressed their concerns with the Democratic senator in his Albany office at the Empire State Plaza Wednesday, Jan. 17. The group was part of a much larger contingent of Catholics from throughout the state attending the New York State Catholic Conference's annual Public Policy Forum.

Led by Greg Haehl, the Catholic Family Center's coordinator of legislative advocacy for Monroe and Livingston Counties, the lobbyists talked about the conference's support for anti-abortion legislation, aid for school asbestos abatement, and increases in welfare funding, among other issues. Although the lobbyists met some resistance from the senator on their abortion views, they nonetheless impressed Perry with their presentation.

"I give seminars on how to lobby, and I think this group was perfect," Sen. Perry later said, adding that "they knew what I was talking about, they knew my positions. They didn't throw anything at me. I thought it was a very informal type of exchange."



Christopher Millette

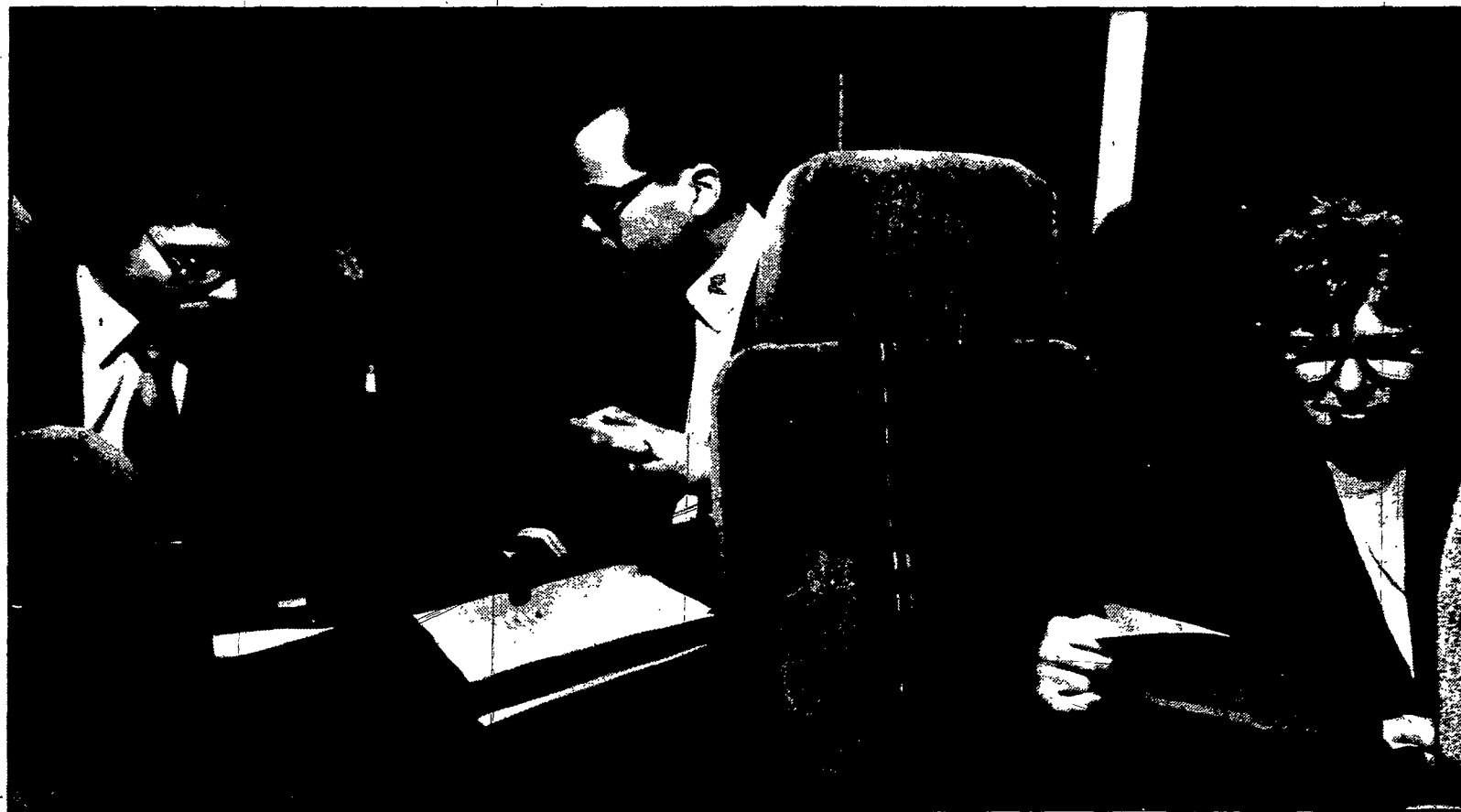
Former Gov. Hugh L. Carey urged Catholic lobbyists to push harder for legislative action on their concerns.

Such "informal exchanges" are the culmination of months of steady work aimed at influencing legislators to vote the church's position on certain issues. The Catholic Church in New York state constantly monitors and addresses state legislators through the New York State Catholic Conference, which represents New York's seven diocesan bishops and the archbishop of New York City.

The conference unifies the dioceses throughout the state so that they speak with one voice on issues of common concern, noted J. Alan Davitt, executive director.

Davitt observed that the Catholic position on any issue is taken seriously by the state government, which clearly recognizes the church as the state's second largest provider — behind the state itself — of health, education and welfare services. This fact is often obscured by the news media's concentration on abortion and Catholic schools, Davitt said. "Abortion and school aid is not the only interest we have," he said.

To support his point, Davitt noted that Catholic conference representatives attend more than 100 meetings a year with state



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Greg Haehl, the Catholic Family Center's coordinator of legislative advocacy for Monroe and Livingston Counties, confers with lobbyist Richard LaPierre (left), while Stasia Sage (right) reviews the legislative agenda during the bus ride from Rochester to Albany last week.

officials, who often call upon church officials to man legislative advisory committees and task forces. For example, he said, the church — which operates 48 hospitals statewide — has taken the lead in pushing for state funding of AIDS-care units.

The conference's literature constantly reiterates the theme that the Catholic bishops and their flock have a duty to be "the voice of the voiceless" — the unborn, the infant, the uneducated, the elderly, the handicapped, the retarded and the imprisoned.

Indeed, one lobbyist who attended the conference's Jan. 17 forum observed that it is the church's concern for others that sets it apart from other lobbying groups.

Kathy Dubel, peace and justice director for the diocese's Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry, said that her Republican assemblyman, George H. Winner, said he found it "refreshing" to talk with a group not concerned with just its own interests. She illustrated her statement by noting that her group told Winner they would prefer that state income taxes not be cut if such a move would hurt state services.

But it's persistence, not selflessness, that earns rewards in the rough-and-tumble world of state politics. Davitt said his staff monitors the course of about 800 of the 20,000 bills introduced in the state legislature each year, and keeps its diocesan contacts informed of developments.

One of those local contacts is Haehl, who coordinates the political letter-writing activities of 250 Catholics in Monroe and Livingston counties. These Catholics have committed themselves to writing legislators on the seven or so issues Haehl's office focuses upon each year.

"We don't have money for direct mailings," Haehl said, explaining that his office doesn't send form letters to the thousands of Catholics in the diocese because such an effort would probably be less effective than the letters volunteers send.

Indeed, politicians, their aides and lobbyists agreed that when it comes to influencing a legislator, the letter-writer is often mightier than the lobbyist or the petitioner, for that matter. For example, Haehl said, Perry — who opposes the death penalty — held up a foot-high stack of petitions favoring the death penalty when he met with the

Rochester group. "If each one of the people on that list has sent a personal letter, I think (Perry) would have to reconsider his position a lot," Haehl said.

One state assemblyman's comments echoed Haehl's assertion. "People take some time to write a letter," said Gary Proud, a Democrat who represents the 131st district. Proud observed that "individually written constituent letters" are even better than form letters sent out in mass mailings by lobbying groups. "The form letter which someone signs ... (is) helpful," he said, "but people can sign just about anything."

Haehl asserted that politicians see more than just a letter's author when they read constituent mail. Each letter is estimated to represent the opinion of 50-60 potential voters, he said.

Bill Gerling, Proud's media-relations director, also stressed the importance of con-

stituent letter writing. "If we get a letter where we can read the return address ... we respond," he said.

Another important aspect of lobbying is legislative visits, Haehl said, citing especially those made to the legislator's home district office.

"I don't get to Washington or Albany much," Haehl said, noting that he prefers to buttonhole politicians when they're home. Politicians take home-office visits more seriously than they do visits to Albany, he said, because visits at home show legislators that they are being monitored by their constituency.

Dubel concurred. "We really think that the most of the effective lobbying takes place in our own districts," she said. Home office visits "serve to develop relationships ...," she concluded.

But even on the home front, no legislator is going to be changed by just one visit

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Lobbyists descend on Albany

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ALBANY — Nearly 1,000 Catholics converged on Empire State Plaza Convention Center Wednesday, Jan. 17, to lobby the state legislature and executive branch on six major issues, including abortion.

Ninety-five delegates represented the Diocese of Rochester at the convention.

The day-long legislative, lobbying effort was orchestrated by the New York State Catholic Conference, which represents the state's eight Catholic bishops. Representatives from New York's seven dioceses and the archdiocese of New York City attended the luncheon along with 171 state legislators and more than 20 state agency heads and officials from the executive branch.

The highlight of the conference came during a luncheon speech in which former New York Gov. Hugh Carey sharply criticized pro-choice Catholic politicians. Carey, who presided over state affairs from 1975-82, said he regretted

the pro-choice abortion stance he avowed during his tenure as governor.

He called upon other Catholic politicians to cast their votes on abortion in accordance with the church's pro-life teachings.

Specifically, Carey called upon Gov. Mario Cuomo and the state legislature to support a bill that would require minors to have parental consent before obtaining abortions.

Such legislation was a concern of Bishop Matthew H. Clark and 20 other prelates from throughout the state who met briefly in closed session with Gov. Cuomo at the governor's mansion. According to Bishop Clark, Cuomo said he would have to see "a specific bill" before deciding whether to support or oppose parental-consent legislation.

Bishop Clark said he and his fellow bishops reiterated to Cuomo the Catholic conference's positions on the following issues, which lobbyists also discussed with legislators throughout the day.

Abortion — In addition to the confer-

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