

Organizers seeks support for grape boycott

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Local supporters of the United Farm Workers' six-year-old boycott of California table grapes have issued a call for three regional supermarket chains — Wegmans, Bells, and Tops — to cease selling the grapes.

Boycott supporters are also calling for the Division of Social Ministry of the Diocese of Rochester — whose board endorsed the boycott Nov. 19, 1989 — to take a more public stance.

"Once we got to the point of demanding substance rather than rhetoric, (the diocese) did nothing," asserted Mary Haffey, director of the Farmworkers Advocacy Center in Geneseo. "We're very disappointed."

At a press conference held March 11 at the offices of the New York State United Teachers, boycott supporters unveiled the contents of a letter sent to officials of the three supermarket chains on Jan. 29.

In the letter, an informal coalition of labor, government and religious leaders asked officials from the three chains to meet with local and national boycott organizers to discuss removing the grapes from their shelves. The grapes are sold in the Rochester area between May and December.

Boycott organizers claim that the grapes pose a health hazard both to farm workers and consumers alike because of pesticides used on them by California farmers. The UFW alleges that pesticide contamination has produced two certified cancer clusters (areas in which the incidence of cancer is far higher than would normally be expected) in the California towns of McFarland and Earlimart.

The letter, which requested that the three chains respond by Feb. 28, was signed by Ron Pettengill, president of the Rochester Labor Council, AFL-CIO; Maxine Childress Brown, vice president of the Rochester City Council; the Rev. Lawrence Witmer, executive director of Genesee Ecumenical Ministries; and Rabbi Judea Miller of Temple B'rith Kodesh.

According to Father Daniel O'Shea, who works with the Farmworkers Advocacy Center, Wegmans was the only one of the three supermarket chains to respond to the letter. The priest said Wegmans' representatives contacted boycott organizers minutes before the March 11 press conference, informing them that Wegmans will not meet with the local coalition.

Calls to the corporate headquarters of Tops and Bells were not returned on Monday, March 12.

Mary Ellen Burris, director of consumer

affairs for Wegmans, said that the company had looked closely at the boycott and the UFW efforts, and had decided not to support the boycott. She said that because of that position, company officials had determined that meeting with UFW officials would not be "productive."

As for the concerns about health, Burris said that for every claim the UFW put forward about worker safety, counter claims were made by other groups in California. "We are unable to determine the facts at this distance," she said.

"When it comes to questions of food safety," Burris continued, "we have done testing of California grapes ... and we are satisfied the products we sell are safe to eat."

Father O'Shea said the press conference was intended to spur local action around the boycott, to put pressure on the chains to begin talks with boycott supporters and UFW officials, and to pave the way for an April 4 Rochester visit by UFW founder and head, Cesar Chavez.

As part of that visit, Chavez is scheduled to speak at Corpus Christi Church, Father O'Shea said, adding that the union leader is expected to make a major announcement concerning the boycott during the visit. That announcement might entail a complete boycott of one of the local chains that

does not support the grape boycott, organizers have said.

Teresa Chavez-Delgado, Chavez's granddaughter and a boycott organizer working out of New York City, was in Rochester for the March 11 press conference. In an interview with the *Catholic Courier*, she explained that the boycott, begun in 1984, has picked up increasing national support, especially since Chavez staged a highly-publicized, 36-day fast in July and August of 1988.

The call for supermarket chains to stop carrying the grapes has been a part of the boycott effort since the beginning, Chavez-Delgado acknowledged. She pointed out that in New York City, for example, several stores — including Red Apple, one of the city's largest chains — had agreed to support the boycott.

Chavez-Delgado said the local group is also looking for the diocese to provide more support than just the Nov. 19 endorsement.

"We would expect and hope to see them give some substance to that support and make it explicit to the public," Chavez-Delgado said.

Father O'Shea claimed that since the endorsement, the diocese has provided no financial or staff support for the boycott effort.

He pointed out, for example, that the coalition had asked to hold the March 11 press conference the diocesan Pastoral Center, but their request was denied.

In explanation of the decision not to allow the press conference to take place at the Pastoral Center, the Division of Social

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Parents' group set against school plan

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — The chairman of an organization opposed to Catholic schools reorganization in Monroe County has released a statement criticizing a finance and governance plan approved by Bishop Matthew H. Clark for the northwest, southeast and southwest quadrants.

Bishop Clark released the plan at a press conference at the diocesan Pastoral Center, 1150 Buffalo Road, on Wednesday, March 7. The plan called for governing boards made up of representatives from parishes and schools to administer schools within each quadrant.

The plan also called for 60 percent of school costs to be financed through tuition and school-based revenues, with the remaining 40 percent of costs financed by parish support. This ratio will be phased in incrementally over the next four years.

According to the plan, no less than 45 percent of per-pupil costs in 1990-91 must be borne by tuition and school-based revenues. By 1994, that figure will top off at 60 percent.

"(Wednesday's) decision signals a continuing callousness on the part of the diocese to the plight of families, many of whom will be unable to afford Catholic education," said John F. Wagner Jr., chairman of Alliance for Catholic Education, which is made up primarily of school

parents.

Wagner released his statement almost immediately following the bishop's press conference, which included Brother Brian Walsh, superintendent of schools, and William Pickett, chairman of the 13-member Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools.

Wagner maintained that the plan will especially hurt middle-class Catholics because they will be ineligible for subsidies geared to the poor and because they don't have the money to pay high tuitions.

His statement referred to the reorganization currently going on in the northeast quadrant as an example of what can happen when a quadrant-wide system of financing is instituted.

"The northeast quadrant plans to raise tuitions again this year, at rates of up to 10 percent," Wagner's statement read. "A predictable enrollment drop will follow, tuitions will again be raised, and the results will be additional financial difficulties for the schools, and the likely closing of more of them."

"It is obvious that the diocese has yet to address the concerns of those many families, who faced with tuition increases of up to 100 percent in some quadrants, will have to take second jobs and place young children in day care programs to be able to afford Catholic schools," the statement continued.

Father George Norton, spokesman for the diocese, said that Wagner's figures on the northeast quadrant were inaccurate, but that he had no further comment on the statement.

John Mendel, chairman of the Northeast Quadrant Governance Board, said that tuition in the northeast quadrant will actually increase by an average of 5 percent next year. He added that the increase was necessary to cover the cost of inflation, and to provide for teachers' salaries and special educational programming in the quadrant.

The chairman declined to comment on Wagner's other statements regarding enrollment until next fall's enrollment figures have been tabulated after the current

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