

DIOCESAN NEWS

Interfaith Action decries cost of prescriptions

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GATES — About 400 people packed Holy Ghost Church the night of Oct. 5 to tell several New York State Legislature representatives one thing: Do something to bring down the price of prescription drugs.

Representing almost 20 Catholic, Protestant and Jewish congregations in Monroe County, as well as such groups as the American Association of Retired Persons, the lively but polite crowd was invited by Interfaith Action, a federation of local congregations.

Interfaith Action representatives from various congregations noted that the federation had surveyed 914 people in Monroe County, and that more than 20 percent reported difficulty paying for drugs. Additionally, in documents provided to the press, Interfaith Action reported that more than 70 percent of those surveyed said that prescription drug prices had risen sharply recently. Meanwhile, federation members said that in 1998, drug companies were the most profitable U.S. industry, receiving a 40 percent profit on drugs sold, and that drug prices have increased an average of 10 percent each year since 1990.

Several slated speakers shared stories of woe concerning how the high price of prescription drugs affects their wallets and their lives.

Mary Lou Hoyt, a parishioner at Holy Ghost, said her 5-year-old son suffers from various ailments that require drugs costing almost \$350 a month to treat.

"It upsets me that some are getting rich by charging high prices for the very drugs my son needs to keep alive," she said to the legislators. "Please, won't you help us?"

Deacon Stan Douglas of St. Rita's Parish,



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Chester Palinski claps in agreement with State Sen. Richard Dollinger, who holds a poster on problems with the rising cost of prescription drugs. Palinski and his wife, Agnes (right), of Our Lady of Mercy Parish, Greece, were among hundreds meeting Oct. 5 at Holy Ghost Church in Gates.

Webster, said one of his senior parishioners on a fixed income paid \$2,000 a month for prescription drugs.

He and some of the other speakers noted that Canadians pay far less for their prescription drugs than New Yorkers. Mary Bishop, a retired registered nurse, said she had traveled to Canada last June with U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter of Rochester on a bus trip to buy prescription drugs. The journey of local constituents was designed to dramatize the plight of prescription drug users in the United States. Seniors like her and her husband must spend hundreds of dollars a month on drugs, Bishop noted,

whereas Canadians — whose national health-care system keeps drug prices low for consumers — spend far less.

"We shouldn't have to leave this country to save on our medications," she said.

Bishop's words echoed several reports out of various congressional offices and news media outlets on the fact that U.S. citizens pay far more for prescription drugs than their counterparts in Europe and Canada — sometimes four times as much, according to U.S. Sen. Byron Dorgan of North Dakota.

Other complaints voiced by the Interfaith Action representatives targeted the drug companies' patent monopolies, which last 17 years, allowing companies to set any price they want, and the fact that the United States is the only industrialized country with no controls on drug prices.

Interfaith Action representatives asked the eight legislators and one non-incumbent legislative candidate present to publicly pledge to work to make drug price reduction a priority, which they all did. In turn, the federation representatives said they would do their part to get constituents to keep alive the movement to reduce drug prices. Interfaith Action representatives

said they would organize a lobby day in Albany next year around the prescription drug issue and bus in constituents to talk to legislators.

Both Rep. Susan V. John, a Democrat from the 131st District, and Sen. George D. Maziarz, a Republican whose 61st District extends from Niagara Falls to Gates, said New Yorkers could find some immediate relief from high drug prices through the recently expanded EPIC program. Single seniors 65 and older with annual incomes as high as \$35,000, and married couples with combined annual incomes up to \$50,000 are eligible for the program, which generally covers more than half the cost of most prescription drugs, both brand name and generic, as well as insulin and insulin syringes. (EPIC information is available by calling toll free 1-800-332-3742, or writing: EPIC, P.O. Box 15018, Albany, NY 12212-5018.)

Maziarz, who designed the EPIC application, said the program needs to be publicized more.

"A lot more seniors are eligible for this program than sign up for it," he said.

Several of the legislators pointed out that there are currently numerous proposals at both the federal and state level to remedy the growing problem of prescription drug prices. And both Maziarz and Sen. Richard A. Dollinger, a Democrat, noted that they sympathized with the calls they heard at Holy Ghost for U.S. drug price parity with Canada. However, both men mused that drug companies might simply turn around and jack up prices in Canada and other nations rather than bring them down in this country.

"Every time the government goes into the marketplace, we can't be sure what the effect of the government going into the marketplace would be," Dollinger said.

Dollinger added that he believed that a solution should come on the national level with the federal government creating a plan to purchase drugs from companies and sell them back to consumers at discounted prices.

There's no doubt a problem, said Toni Wacenske, a member of the local organizing committee of Interfaith Action at Holy Ghost. People on fixed incomes are suffering under the current system, she stressed.

"It's terrible when someone goes in to buy a drug and says, 'I can't. I have to eat.'"

Nazareth to begin expansion

Nazareth College has unveiled a five-year expansion plan that will double its campus to nearly 150 acres by purchasing buildings and about 73 acres from the Sisters of St. Joseph. The property acquisition, which eventually will include the order's motherhouse and infirmary, was reported in the *Catholic Courier* last spring.

Sister Janice Morgan, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph, and Nazareth College President Robert Miller signed the final contract Sept. 19, after 14 months of negotiating. Proceeds from the sale will go toward a new building as well as the costs of SSJ ministries and the sisters' retirement, Sister Morgan said. Although membership in the local congregation has been declining, she declared, "We are 395 strong."

The college announced Sept. 26 that it will acquire the land over the next three years. Nazareth planned to break ground this month for a 128-bed residence hall on a newly acquired 20-acre parcel between the St. Joseph Convent Infirmary and an existing Nazareth residence hall.

In 2003 the college will acquire the remaining property from the congregation. The congregation's motherhouse will become an administrative center, and the infirmary, a 100-bed residence hall.

Sister Morgan said the sisters expect to relocate to a new building on French Road by December 2002. The congregation is working with an architect and engineer to plan the building, which will combine the motherhouse and infirmary.

Structures on the sisters' property are consistent architecturally with current buildings, the college stated.

Plans also call for a math and science building, and a bridge linking the old campus with the new.

Enrollment at Nazareth is 1,910 undergraduate students and 1,165 graduate students. The freshman class of 402 students is the largest class in the college's history. Enrollment is projected to further increase, to approximately 2,000 undergraduates by 2005.

— Kathleen Schwarz

Recognizing



Eduardo J. Navarro, a parishioner at St. Pius the Tenth Church in Chili, has been named Rochester Hispanic Business Association Businessman of the Year 2000. A native

of Cuba, Navarro owns EIC Electronics, an electronics manufacturing and contract labor firm in Rochester, which grew 50 percent after he acquired the firm in 1999. He has also remodeled the firm's building to enhance the firm's manufacturing and create a more aesthetically pleasing neighborhood environment. He is married with three children.

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