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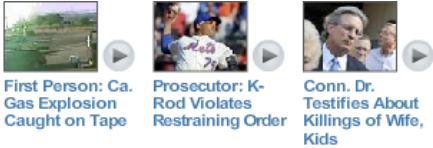
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Sign of the times: Candidates try to connect

LIAM FARRELL, Staff Writer Published 09/09/10

Standing on a highway overpass in the heat of an early August morning, Del. Don Dwyer was undeniably in his element.

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Commuters heading north that morning were greeted by not only the Republican from Glen Burnie, but also by an almost 80-foot-wide display of signs and flags. The delegate, seeking his third term, tried to make a connection - however brief - by pointing and waving at the driver of every car, truck and van that passed beneath his feet.

Dwyer, one of the most conservative and controversial politicians in Maryland, calls the traveling display his "brand," a way to stick in the minds of voters.

"You can't get any more grass roots than this, because it doesn't cost any money," he said. "I don't have the money to fight back. This is the way I can reach the people."

As the post-Labor Day world turns from baseball and seersucker to football and tweed, commuters across Anne Arundel

County are sure to catch more glimpses of political candidates standing on the side of roadways with wide signs and grins.

And there's no time to waste, as the primary election has already begun. Maryland wraps up its first foray into early voting today, and the official primary follows on Tuesday.

County Councilman Chuck Ferrar, who is facing a challenge in the Democratic primary from Chris Trumbauer, has spent many recent mornings waving signs at the intersection of Forest Drive and Chinquapin Round Road.

Ferrar said it's one way to guarantee people who may know him from the community or business world make the connection that he is running for County Council.

"It is amazing how many people see me (waving signs) and recognize me later on," he said.

County Executive John R. Leopold, typically seen as the pioneer of sign waving in the county, said he even went out to a roadside before surgery this summer. He said sign waving works best as a supplement to knocking on doors.

"Sign waving is only good as a reinforcement of personal contact," he said. "Sign waving should try to establish ... that psychic energy."

Some candidates have found unique ways to get attention in their sign-waving efforts. Dr. Ron Elfenbein, a Republican running for state Senate in District 30, started holding free blood pressure screenings on Forest Drive last week.

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"Most people kind of tune (sign waving) out," he said. "I his is kind of a good way to stand out."

Elfenbein said he doesn't try to force politics on the people who stop, since there is a medical purpose to what he is doing. But he did acknowledge that this is a way to introduce himself to the community before the election.

"Clearly there is a political motive there," he said. "We got a lot of positive feedback."

Dwyer tries to choose his areas based on traffic counts to maximize his exposure. Although sign waving has physical benefits - the delegate estimates he will lose 20 to 30 pounds over the election season - he acknowledges it is hard to know how many drivers actually vote in a given district.

Meaningful dialogue also can be tough to find.

"I only got eight middle fingers this morning," Dwyer said. "I'd love to have one of them stop and just engage in a conversation."

lfarrell@capitalgazette.com

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Sign waving is an invaluable tool. I, like many voters, vote for the first person I see on the street who holds up a sign indicating his or her candidacy. There is simply no better system for selecting our voices in government.

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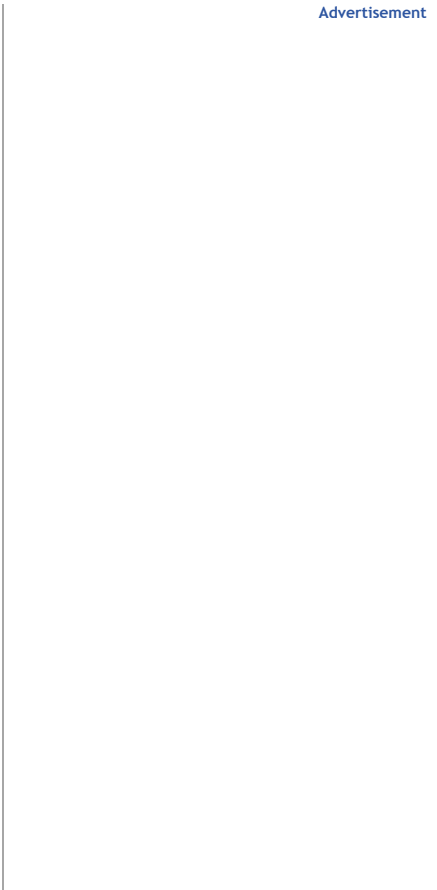
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