

Garis: Lower taxes mean downtown growth

by Marc Maxson

Richard Garis, a Republican candidate for a seat on the State College Borough Council, talked recently with Voices about his background, issues facing the Borough of State College and the political process.

Voices: Can you tell readers about yourself?

I was born and raised in State College. There're very few of us natives in State College.

Currently I own and operate a landscaping business.... Before that I was police officer in the State College Police Department for 28 years.

V: Does being a cop give you a different perspective of the town?

Not really. A police officer really shouldn't be different from any of the other citizens. It's just that your job is enforcing the laws and helping people.

V: What got you interested in politics?

I don't know. I just like working with people, I guess. That was why I was a cop. I like to be where the action is.

V: Was there an issue that inspired you to run?

Actually, this is the third time I've run for council. I'm a Republican, which makes it a little more difficult in the Borough of State College because it is a 60 percent Democrat town.

V: What is the most pressing issues facing the Borough?

Money. It is the same thing that I told them two

years ago.... We need to revitalize the downtown and make it attractive to business... In turn, it makes for a strong economy which helps to keep the property tax down.

Two years ago we were in a debate. When I mentioned that we had a dwindling tax base in the Borough of State College, [another candidate] interrupted me to say, 'no that's not right.' Well, I knew. I had facts and figures right then that it was the case, and recent events have proved I was right.

Over 40 percent of this borough is non-taxable. Every time government or Penn State buys a new piece of property, or a church expands, that's one more parcel of property that is non-taxable. There are a lot of county agencies that have moved up here. Businesses moved out of town, and there are a lot of reasons for that.

V: Such as?

The business privilege tax. Whether or not it in reality caused people to lose money, the perception of businesspeople is that it is just one more tax that they can't afford. You have parking, you have traffic. If you go to the Nittany Mall, parking is free. Those things are causing people not to go downtown.

V: What do you imagine will happen in the Borough in the next 30 years?

Penn State University will have bought more of downtown. Some of the highrises may have been replaced with condos. I believe it has been harder to fill those rental properties because of all the newer and nicer developments outside of town. Rising property taxes could scare away some single-family homes and a lot of student hous-

ing may have left the Borough altogether.

V: Why did you join the Republican Party?

I don't know why I joined it. I've been a Republican since I was old enough to vote. My parents were Democrats. It certainly wasn't to be rebellious against them, but I don't know why.

V: How do local politics compare with regional and national politics?

Once you get out of State College, candidates and lawmakers and whoever's been elected vote along party lines. I don't think it works that way in State College. Tom Daubert, a registered Republican, crosses party lines to vote with Democratic people, which isn't a bad thing. Recently, Democrat Craig Humphrey crossed party lines and voted for Dick McCarl to replace Janet Knauer when she left, even though McCarl

is a Republican. So in the Borough Council I don't think parties mean as much."

V: What thoughts do you have about the political process?

I think in this country we need to revamp our political system. I think that it shouldn't matter what party you are, you should be able to run for an election, and the top vote-getter should become president, the next vote-getter vice president, and so on. It's not a new idea, but I really think we need to get back to that.

We are shortchanging our country with our [current] system. It has [become] nothing but a big political machine, where it's who can raise the most money, who has the most friends, and that's not the way it should be. There is no doubt in my mind that our founding fathers never intended for anything like this. But I don't know that we're ever going to see changes happen.



Photo by L. Reidar Jensen

Borough Council candidate Richard Garis in his State College home.

Huh?

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Could you repeat that?**

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