

Commissioner hopefuls taking unhealthy approach

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LANCASTER COUNTY, Pa. - Lancaster County has almost 500,000 people and no county health department.

Is something wrong with that picture? Not according to three Republicans who want to be county commissioner.

"I personally don't see the need for it," said Heidi Wheaton at a candidates forum Monday.

"It's another level of bureaucracy that the county doesn't need," asserted Dennis Stuckey.

"I believe this would be a tremendous mistake," said Scott Martin.

Public health unneeded? Bureaucratic? A tremendous mistake? I could hardly believe what I was hearing. If these candidates are to be believed and public health need not be a county concern, then Lancaster County must truly be blessed.

Why, every child here must be getting immunized! Every adult must know his or her blood-cholesterol level! Every fast-food joint must be immaculate! Every septic tank must be intact and keeping human waste from seeping into groundwater!

Troubling facts

If, as the politicians imply, Lancaster County's 500,000 people don't need local coordination of preventive health services, why aren't we marketing the county as the Shangri-La of health?

I can see the ad campaign now: Come to Lancaster County — so wholesome a board of health would be bored.

Or: Come to Lancaster County — we keep our minds and most of our fingernails clean.

Alas, all is not well. Many people in the county would be healthier if a county-level department took charge of public health.

Hospitals, nonprofit groups and a tiny state health center in East Lampeter Township contribute to pieces of the public health puzzle here, but no one is accountable for the whole picture. The result?

More than 20 percent of mothers here fail to get early prenatal care. Among other large counties, only Philadelphia and Berks have a bigger problem.

The rate of babies who die here before their first birthday exceeds the state rate. The death rate among children ages 1 to 4 is even worse.

The incidence of sickness here caused by food-borne salmonella contamination is much higher than in the rest of the state.

Tens of thousands of people here can't find a dentist who'll see them.

The ratio of school nurses to students here is lower than the state average.

On-lot septic systems are failing and polluting wells, resulting in an increase of parasite-borne diarrhea.

But don't tell that to Stuckey.

"Your property is sacred to me," Stuckey declared Monday. "I'm not going to be the guy that votes to hire someone that has the ability to come on to your property and start telling you what you have to do with" your leaking septic tank.

Oh, no, we couldn't have that. Just buy bottled water if your neighbor has contaminated your well.

But who needs facts?

Candidates, of course, are entitled to their opinions, but it's disappointing when they take an adamant stand before they fairly examine the facts.

A coalition of local organizations — it includes United Way, Business Group on Health, every local hospital, even National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom — is behind an effort to document the need for and the cost of a county health department. Facts will be forthcoming.

But instead of waiting for the report, Wheaton is opposed. "I believe in the Ronald Reagan philosophy of limited government," she explained.

Martin is opposed to county involvement, too, explaining, "I was very upset that the federal government got involved in education."

And, as we've seen, Dennis "Your Property is Sacred" Stuckey also is against it.

Ideology seems to come first for these candidates. Keeping an open mind and looking at the facts comes second and third.

I'm feeling a little ill.

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