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Culture of corruption

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At least a couple of dozen times a week, by Joseph Vadella's reckoning, someone stops the former Carbondale mayor on the street and asks when he'll seek office again.

"With me, I could run tomorrow and win. I know I can," Vadella said. "People follow me around all day long up there, wondering if I'm going to run."

The 50-year-old Democrat is a proven vote-getter. He eased into the mayor's office by capturing more than 60 percent of the votes cast in the 1995 election, defeating the incumbent. He wasn't on the ballot four years later but almost won the job again with a spirited write-in campaign against two candidates whose names were listed, losing by just two votes.

It's what happened in between those two campaigns that would seem to make Vadella a curious choice for future officeholder.

In 1997, Vadella was forced to resign as mayor after getting caught up in a ballot-tampering scheme during his brother's run for district justice. He eventually pleaded guilty to a federal misdemeanor count of harassing a grand jury witness, along with a handful of minor state charges, and spent four months in federal prison.

It's hardly the ideal resume for someone seeking to return to a position of public trust.

Except perhaps here.

Partisanship and patronage

Public corruption is as much a part of the landscape of Northeastern Pennsylvania,

and indeed the commonwealth as a whole, as the crumbling relics of its industrial past.

The sordid "kids-for-cash" scandal that enveloped former Luzerne County judges Mark A. Ciavarella Jr. and Michael T. Conahan, may have taken public corruption to a new low.

The still-growing federal investigation it produced, including an unusual public appeal by the FBI for information about job-selling in regional schools, has already snagged other county employees and resulted in the arrests of officials in the Pittston Area and Wilkes-Barre Area school districts.

But it builds on a long and storied tradition. It's a tradition that means the arrest, indictment or conviction of an elected or appointed official is just as likely to elicit stifled yawns as outraged cries among a public seemingly inured to the criminal antics of those it places in positions of power and trust.

In just the past 30 years, the Northeast Pennsylvania roll of political ignominy is peppered with the once high and mighty laid low by scandal, names like Daniel J. Flood, Ernie Preate, Frank Eagen and Frank Serafini.

Pencil in the relatively minor players like Vadella, or even former Lackawanna County workers' compensation fund administrator Charles Costanzo, who was convicted Wednesday of money laundering and other federal charges, and the list starts to become unwieldy.

"Do people really want change? They say they do, but you wonder," said Thomas Baldino, Ph.D., professor of political science at Wilkes University. "The forces of inertia are strong. It's the devil you know versus the devil you don't know."

Sociologist Robert P. Wolensky, a Swoyersville native who has done extensive research into the region's anthracite mining past, believes Northeastern Pennsylvania's culture of corruption had its genesis in the exploitation and greed that accompanied industrialization in the 1800s.

It evolved as various waves of immigrants jockeyed for entry into the system, developing ethnic loyalties that still hold sway today.

And it blossomed into its a more modern incarnation, Wolensky said, as the mines and railroads started shutting down into the mid-20th century. People were desperate for jobs, and those who controlled the hiring, particularly in public circles, suddenly had a valuable commodity.

"People were willing to pay for a job at the courthouse, a job at the school district," said Wolensky, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and adjunct professor at King's College in Wilkes-Barre. "The only morality was, 'What can line my pocket?'"

That doesn't excuse corruption, he said, but it explains the emergence of a rationalized perspective that something is illegal only if you get caught: "Everybody is doing it. The whole world works this way. Only suckers play by the rules."

G. Terry Madonna, Ph.D., director of the Franklin & Marshall College Center for Politics and Public Affairs, said public corruption is endemic across Pennsylvania. A recent U.S. Department of Justice report showed 555 convictions in corruption cases statewide between 1998 and 2007.

Madonna said if the light now shining on Northeastern Pennsylvania seems unduly harsh, blame Ciavarella and Conahan. Taking \$2.6 million in kickbacks in exchange for sending juveniles to detention centers is a cut above the typical pay-to-play behind the downfall of so many other public officials.

"That is pretty egregious by any standard," he said.

Madonna said the commonwealth has a long tradition of high-level partisanship and patronage, which has bred a sense of hubris and entitlement.

Throw in the sheer breadth of government in Pennsylvania — 67 counties, 2,566 municipalities, 501 school districts, uncounted boards, commissions and authorities, and a 253-member Legislature — and there is more than ample opportunity for good public officials to succumb to temptation.

"There is a whole series of interlocking reasons, but in the end it's just a moral shortcoming," he said.

Tendency to forgive

And whether it's a matter of high tolerance or simply grudging acceptance, Pennsylvanians can be very forgiving of a politician who strays from the straight and narrow.

"We've got a culture in which voters look less at the moral condition and are pragmatic: Has the person delivered?" Madonna said.

Take Daniel J. Flood, for example.

The flamboyant 11th District congressman, who is still revered in the Wyoming Valley, was elected to a 16th term by a landslide in 1978 while under federal indictment on bribery and perjury charges. Flood resigned from Congress two years later and subsequently pleaded guilty to accepting bribes from individuals seeking government contracts. He died in 1994.

Although he was eventually acquitted, former 10th District U.S. Rep. Joseph M. McDade easily won re-election twice — in 1992 and 1994 — while under indictment on federal racketeering, conspiracy and bribery charges. He chose not to run again in 1998, ending a 36-year career in the House.

Wolensky said officials like Flood and McDade, "guys who are delivering the bacon, so to speak," are judged less sternly by the public than those perceived to have abused their trust purely for personal enrichment, like the former Luzerne County judges.

"In the final analysis, you say, 'Yeah, they may be crooks, but they've helped us a lot,'" he said. "They tend to be given more leeway unless they do something that is egregiously selfish."

Vadella thinks most people in Carbondale view the 1997 charges against him the same way he does — a "stupid thing" that political foes finagled into a federal case — and reasons that is why he could run again and win.

"People understand that in politics gray can become white and gray can become black, depending on what group you're with," Vadella said. "If you have a target on your back, gray becomes black. If you don't have a target on your back, gray becomes white."

He is not the only local public official to jump back into political arena after a brush with the law.

In 1992, two Moosic officials — Mayor John Segilia and Councilman Joseph Mercatili — pleaded no contest to obstruction of justice charges for fixing parking tickets and interfering in drunken-driving cases. They had to resign but were later re-elected. Both are back on the ballot in the May 19 primary.

Vadella said the public can forgive a wayward official whose transgression doesn't involve taking money.

"All people care about is getting something done. That's all they want," he said. "It boils down to one thing: What are you going to do?"

Recipe for corruption

Baldino, the Wilkes professor, said a pervasive commitment to family, tradition and place is one of the great things about Northeast Pennsylvania, but it comes with baggage.

"The dark side is we tend to support people who don't deserve our support," he said.

Little is likely to change here or elsewhere in Pennsylvania until the public sheds its "lackadaisical attitude" toward corruption and demands more, including stronger ethics codes and public integrity units whose primary job is to monitor, audit and examine the activities of officials, Madonna said.

"We need more watchdogs on the front end and more diligent prosecutors on the back end," he said.

Tim Potts, co-founder and president of the nonpartisan Democracy Rising Pennsylvania, said it is not a coincidence that most high-profile corruption prosecutions in Northeast Pennsylvania have been handled at the federal level.

The state's own anti-corruption laws are weak and enforcement is abysmal, with penalties "that are puny instead of punitive," he said. If you want a recipe for corruption, Potts said, start there.

"Politicians forever have been telling people this is just the way it is — you don't have the right to expect any better," he said. "But when people realize they have a chance to change things for the better, they will change things for the better."

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