

The Miami Student

Amid rumors of collusion, candidates received common aid

By Asst. News Editor Jake Gold

When campaign signs for four candidates in Oxford's upcoming city council election began popping up together in store windows, front yards and on third-party signposts outside Oxford, online discussions appeared, calling into question the existence of a "bloc" or "slate" between nearly half the contenders in the nonpartisan election.

"I am formally inviting Jace Prows, Austin Worrell, Drew Davis, and Samantha Elizabeth Vogel to explain here, publicly, why their signs are being placed as what I refer to as 'The Gang of Four,'" an Oxford Township resident wrote in a now-deleted post in a community Facebook group. "What is it about your candidates that so appeals to one or more rental property holders in Oxford that your signs are consistently placed together?"

While the four candidates have categorically denied charges of collusion, they did receive significant financial and logistical aid from local retired businessman Jack Cohen, according to Cohen, Worrell and each candidate's financial disclosure documents.

"I've provided information support to them, helping connect them to my friends, donated to each of them, and helped find sign locations," wrote Cohen, a former Trump campaign volunteer in an email.

"I met Jack [Cohen] on the campaign trail and he loved that a student was running," Worrell said. "He also recognized that as a young college kid I don't have the resources or connections to put the money needed to run, so he said he'd talk to his friends [and] people around town about me and try to get donations, or places to put up signs... Just like with any of my supporters, I didn't question who he's voted for, what party, or what he does for a living."

A letter circulated by local Democrats accused the four candidates of "collusion between major landlords and bar owners — many of whom do not actually live in Oxford — to support very inexperienced candidates, some of whom have personal connections to these same special interests."

The letter, signed by seven people including the president emeritus of the Butler County Progressive PAC, endorses four other candidates: David Prytherch, Edna Southard, Mike Smith and Chantel Raghu. Cohen, a former member of the Board

of Zoning Appeals, referred to this letter as an endorsement of “the only single-minded ‘bloc.’”

Newly-released mandatory campaign finance disclosures show some similarities inside the two alleged factions.

Davis, Prows, Vogel and Worrell received several identical donations:

- Ned Hoelzer, former partner of Park Place Real Estate (a company that rents over 300 units across Oxford) contributed \$300 to each candidate.
- Mark Weisman, owner of Brick Street Bar and Grill and 45 East, donated \$400 to each candidate.
- James Clawson, a founder of CKC Rentals (a company that rents over 70 units across Oxford) donated \$100 to each candidate.
- Cohen, whose email signature reads “Proud but concerned longtime citizen of Oxford for over 40 years,” contributed \$400 to each candidate.
- Richard Wespiser, owner of 4-D National Investments (a property-rental company with over 30 units in Oxford), contributed \$100 to each candidate.

Vogel, Prows and Worrell each received additional identical donations:

- David Wespiser, owner of several local hotels (including The Elms and the Hampton Inn) and another founder of CKC Rentals, donated \$50 to each candidate.
- Paul Brady, owner of 90 residential properties in Oxford, donated \$100 to each candidate.
- David and Ann Prows, relatives of Jace Prows and owners of six apartment units in Oxford, donated \$50 to to each candidate.
- Todd Hall, owner of some residential buildings in southwest Ohio, donated \$100 to each candidate.
- Jeff Couch, an RV rental company owner in southwest Ohio, donated \$25 to each candidate.

At the time of publication, Raghu and Smith’s financial disclosures are not available through the Butler County Board of Elections, but Prytherch and Southard both received similar contributions from some donors:

- The Butler County Progressive PAC contributed \$250 to each candidate.
- James Rubenstein, a professor in the geography department, contributed \$100 to each candidate.
- Jon Ralinovsky, a piano technician affiliated with Miami, contributed \$40 to Southard and \$100 to Prytherch.

The candidates in both alleged “slates” deny rumors of collusion, citing the apolitical nature of Oxford’s city council.

“I am not beholden to anyone who supports me in town,” Worrell said. “I’ve made that very clear to anyone that’s donated financially, to anyone who’s put my signs up....When I’m elected, I’m going to listen to the concerns of the town and do what’s best for our town, and that’s certainly not catering to the interests of any one person. I think that’s just unethical and inappropriate... [The allegations] are outrageous.”

Prytherch agreed.

“Thankfully, elections in Oxford are non-partisan,” he wrote in an email. “I am proud, however, to be endorsed by the good people of the Butler County Progressives, as well as the Fraternal Order of Police. But, our campaigns are independent and grassroots, supported by individual citizens, not orchestrated by special interests. Honestly, the signs tell you everything you need to know.”

Corey Watt, the final candidate in the nine-person electoral battle for council, has not been alleged to be a member of either “bloc.”

Contribution and property ownership data is all of public record and was collected from the Butler County Board of Elections, Butler County Auditor and the Ohio Secretary of State’s business lookup tool.