

## Issue Vs. Expertise In Race For Board; Immigration Stand Hovering Over Pr. William Ballot

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### **Body**

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Corey A. Stewart had just downed a plate of sausage goulash at Cafe Mozart, his favorite District hangout, when illegal immigration got in the way of dessert. The chairman of the Prince William Board of County Supervisors was thinking German chocolate cake, but his waiter, Alex Kemsy, a bearish Ukrainian, was worried about a friend in Dale City.

"Will he lose his house?" asked Kemsy, explaining that the friend, an illegal immigrant from Honduras with two jobs, two children and a lot of home equity, was now cowering in fear of Prince William's new anti-illegal immigrant policies.

Stewart gave a reassuring laugh and said that, no, the man's house would not be taken away. Then he flipped into campaign mode, telling Kemsy that his friend was more likely to be deported.

But the man worked hard and didn't cause trouble, Kemsy said.

"I don't want to sound cruel, but people should obey the rules," Stewart said flatly. Then he ordered cake.

If the issue of illegal immigration follows Stewart, a Republican, everywhere these days, it is largely by his own design. No other politician in the region has staked his political fortunes on the issue as much as Stewart, a 39-year-old trade lawyer who defeated Democrat Sharon E. Pandak in a special election last year for the county's top job. The two are facing off again this year with a four-year term up for grabs.

Last time, both candidates were relatively unknown quantities, each vying to replace chairman Sean T. Connaughton (R), who left to head the U.S. Maritime Administration. But this year's election is centered mainly on Stewart and his dramatic 10-month term. Although Stewart's support cuts across party lines, so does opposition to him, and at least one Republican board member has broken ranks to support Pandak.

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Stewart began generating buzz and catching flak soon after taking office. He helped pass a one-year freeze on new applications for residential development and pressed to keep tax bills flat in a tight budget year by squeezing certain county services and trimming staff. Then came the county's proposal to target illegal immigrants.

Although the effort was started by Supervisor John T. Stirrup Jr. (R-Gainesville), Stewart quickly became the policy's biggest champion. In recent months, he has appeared on national television, testified before Congress and traded barbs with officials in Fairfax and Montgomery counties. "Corey Stewart Cracks Down on Illegal Immigration!" his campaign Web site trumpets.

Stewart's goal is to make his rematch against Pandak a referendum on illegal immigration, tapping into a groundswell of frustration over quality-of-life concerns, such as residential overcrowding, day laborers and gang activity. So when fellow Prince William supervisors deferred a vote on financing the county's plan to target illegal immigrants, Stewart didn't conceal his eagerness to get the measure approved before Election Day.

"I have insisted that the Board vote on this no later than October 16," he wrote to a constituent in an e-mail obtained by The Washington Post. "This is the last meeting before the election on November 6, and it is imperative that the Board vote before the election to avoid losing momentum."

Stewart later said in an interview that he would be "knocking heads and twisting arms" because he "didn't trust [other supervisors] to do the right thing."

Pandak sees this message and other statements by Stewart as a pattern of "grandstanding." She accuses him of running the county government on slogans and publicity stunts, alienating colleagues and sowing "deep divisions" in the process.

"He lacks the expertise to represent the second-largest county in the state," Pandak said in an interview at her Woodbridge campaign headquarters. Her campaign motto this year: "A leader you can trust."

Pandak, 54, would like the election to be about her expertise, contrasting her qualifications with Stewart's much-shorter tenure in county government. A native of Staunton, Pandak served as Prince William County attorney from 1989 to 2004 and received the county's highest job-performance rating before going into private practice. If Stewart tends to talk in sound bites, as his opponents say, Pandak speaks in paragraphs that suggest a studied, technocratic approach to public administration.

While Stewart excels with one-line zingers and the folksy, back-slapping style of a classic campaigner, Pandak has been working hard to connect with voters on a personal level. Although she has spent nearly 25 years in county government, says she lost to Stewart last year partly because of a "lack of name recognition," she says.

This time around, Pandak has a larger campaign staff and a deeper war chest, out-raising Stewart \$360,000 to \$228,000, according to campaign finance reports.

As he did a year ago, Stewart has sought to make an issue of Pandak's contributions, claiming she is heavily financed by residential developers who have routed money to her directly and through the state Democratic Party.

Pandak calls this "a smear campaign," noting that Stewart has raised a larger portion of his money from development interests this year than she has. But Stewart insists that his donations are primarily from companies looking to build more commercial and office space, which he welcomes.

On the hot-button issue of immigration, Pandak has pilloried Stewart for "mishandling" the issue, saying she would have tackled the county's concerns differently by proposing to fine employers who hire illegal workers. Had she been on the board, she said, she would have worked to build broader support for new policies at the state level, because "the problem doesn't start and stop with Prince William's borders."

"I absolutely am willing to confront the problem," she said, "but to use it as a grandstanding political issue and divide this community is wrong."

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Where Pandak sees division, Stewart believes that he has engaged county residents on the issues they care about most -- transportation and illegal immigration -- and that he will be rewarded on Election Day. The Minnesota-raised Stewart fashions himself as a fighter for the county's everyman, and, in many ways, he resembles the type of voter that has moved to Prince William in recent years, with a long commute and young children in the public school system.

Like Pandak, Stewart adamantly opposes the planned conversion of Interstate 95's HOV lanes to HOT lanes. But with Stewart, the issue is more personal. Stewart regularly gives rides to other county commuters through the improvised, anonymous carpool system known as "slugging" that arose because of the three-people-per-vehicle HOV rule. The arrangement also allows Stewart to campaign to a captive audience while he drives to work at his Georgetown law firm.

As Stewart has pushed harder in recent weeks for the county's anti-illegal immigrant policies to be funded and approved before Election Day, some county board members have begun to push back, expressing frustration with what they call Stewart's combative style and electioneering from the dais. One longtime Republican supervisor, Maureen S. Caddigan (Dumfries), has crossed party lines to support Pandak, and Democrats say that Stewart is more vulnerable now than before.

"Corey's been making mistakes all over the place," said Pete Frisbie, chairman of the Prince William County Democratic Party. "He's your typical politician who's willing to say anything to get elected."

With a proposal for sharp increases to the fees charged to developers, known as proffers, also facing a supervisors' vote Tuesday, the board meeting will be a pre-election barometer for Stewart. If the other board members -- five Republicans and two Democrats -- vote to fund the illegal immigration policies, as Stewart has urged, and back his proffer increases, he may pick up momentum toward Election Day.

"I'm sure certain people do not agree with everything he's done," Stirrup said. "But I think what people respect about Corey is they know where he stands, and they like the direction the county is going in."

## Graphic

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IMAGE

IMAGE; By Gerald Martineau -- The Washington Post; Board Chairman Corey A. Stewart sees illegal immigration as linked to key quality-of-life concerns.

IMAGE; By Richard A. Lipski -- The Washington Post; Sharon E. Pandak, Stewart's Democratic opponent, has accused him of "grandstanding."

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