

LANCASTER NEW ERA

April 17, 2005, Sunday

Copyright 2005 Lancaster Newspapers, Inc.

SUNDAY NEWS (LANCASTER, PA.)

SECTION: LANCASTER, Pg. B-1, SMART REMARKS

When Wal-Mart moves in, thank your local values voter

Gil Smart

I like this one.

Take Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum. Please.

Santorum is widely regarded as one of the more conservative members of the U.S. Senate and is thought to be a major target of Democrats in 2006, the idea being that this red-state senator is too conservative for this blue state. That, of course, makes him something of a local darling.

But I suspect some of his loudest supporters might pipe down a bit if they knew the identity of one of the good senator's largest corporate donors.

A little background: Attytood, the Web log of the Philadelphia Daily News, last week followed up on a John Baer column in the print edition of the newspaper that chronicled how, during the Terri Schiavo ordeal, Santorum spent time in Florida praying with Terri's family; he also canceled a town meeting in Tampa on President Bush's plans for Social Security reform "out of respect" for them.

But he had plenty of time for some "other meetings" - as in, fund-raisers for his 2006 campaign.

The total take was a cool \$250,000, reported Baer. But that wasn't even the best part.

The best part is that Santorum jetted around the state in a corporate jet owned by Wal-Mart. And that, the Daily News reported, is but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the senator's relationship with the mega-retailer.

"According to campaign records," the blog notes, "Wal-Mart's political action committee, which has become a major backer of the GOP in the last few years, gave \$10,000 to Santorum's campaign in late November.

"Lobbyists who work for the firms hired in recent years by Wal-Mart to represent its sweeping political interests - including Patton Boggs, Cassidy and Associates and Ernst & Young - have given at least \$21,793 more, most of that to a Santorum-controlled political action committee called America's Foundation."

And what, the Daily News asked, does Wal-Mart get for its largesse? Plenty: For in addition to shilling for the "culture of life," Santorum has been a major supporter of changes in minimum wage and overtime rules that would greatly benefit Wal-Mart, the nation's largest low-wage employer; Santorum has backed limits on new lawsuits, a boon in that Wal-Mart is one of the most oft-sued companies in the nation.

Don't forget the estate tax, or "death tax," as conservatives like to call it. Santorum's against it; so, you might imagine, is the world's wealthiest family.

Finally, Santorum has been a big supporter of the Charitable Giving, or CARE, Act; "One of the proposal's obscure provisions would allow a foundation to receive a gift from an 'interested' corporation in excess of \$1 billion, if the foundation agrees to divest itself of the gift within 10 years and adopt a 12 percent all-grants payout rate while holding the stock," reports the Daily News.

The National Council for **Responsible Philanthropy** opposes this, saying that it breaks down the wall between foundations and corporations, and that it is being pushed "apparently at the urging of the Walton (Wal-Mart) family."

"Santorum may be Pennsylvania's junior senator," concludes the Daily News, "but when it comes to representing the

interests of Wal-Mart, he's the top dog."

And so the question becomes this:

How is it that those who have so vocally opposed Wal-Mart's continued attempts to build new stores here can, at the same time, support a senator who has been an unabashed advocate of the company's interests?

Understand that I am not one of the anti-Wal-Mart crowd; but among that crowd are many prominent conservatives who have supported Santorum specifically because of his position on values, on abortion, on gay marriage.

Yet here is where the rubber meets the road, here is where the abstract ideology that so resonates with conservatives comes up against the way they live. For if Wal-Mart is a contributor to the destruction of communities, as so many in Lancaster County seem to believe, is Santorum then also culpable in his acceptance of the company's money?

Or do these campaign contributions and the fact that he has been a champion of the issues that most affect Wal-Mart have nothing to do with the mega-retailer's attempts to build stores at the Buck, along Centerville Road and in Mount Joy?

This is the great disconnect at the heart of modern conservatism, whereby values voters' drive to enrich the moral life of a nation ultimately impoverishes their own communities.

So if conservative Lancaster County is going to continue to regard Santorum as its standard-bearer, then perhaps conservative Lancaster County ought to stop complaining about Wal-Mart and embrace it, as Santorum has.

You may yet find the culture of life.

That is, if you look in aisle six, behind the paper towels.

Gil Smart is assistant news editor of the Sunday News. E-mail him at gsmartlnpnews.com, or phone 291-8817.

LOAD-DATE: April 19, 2005