

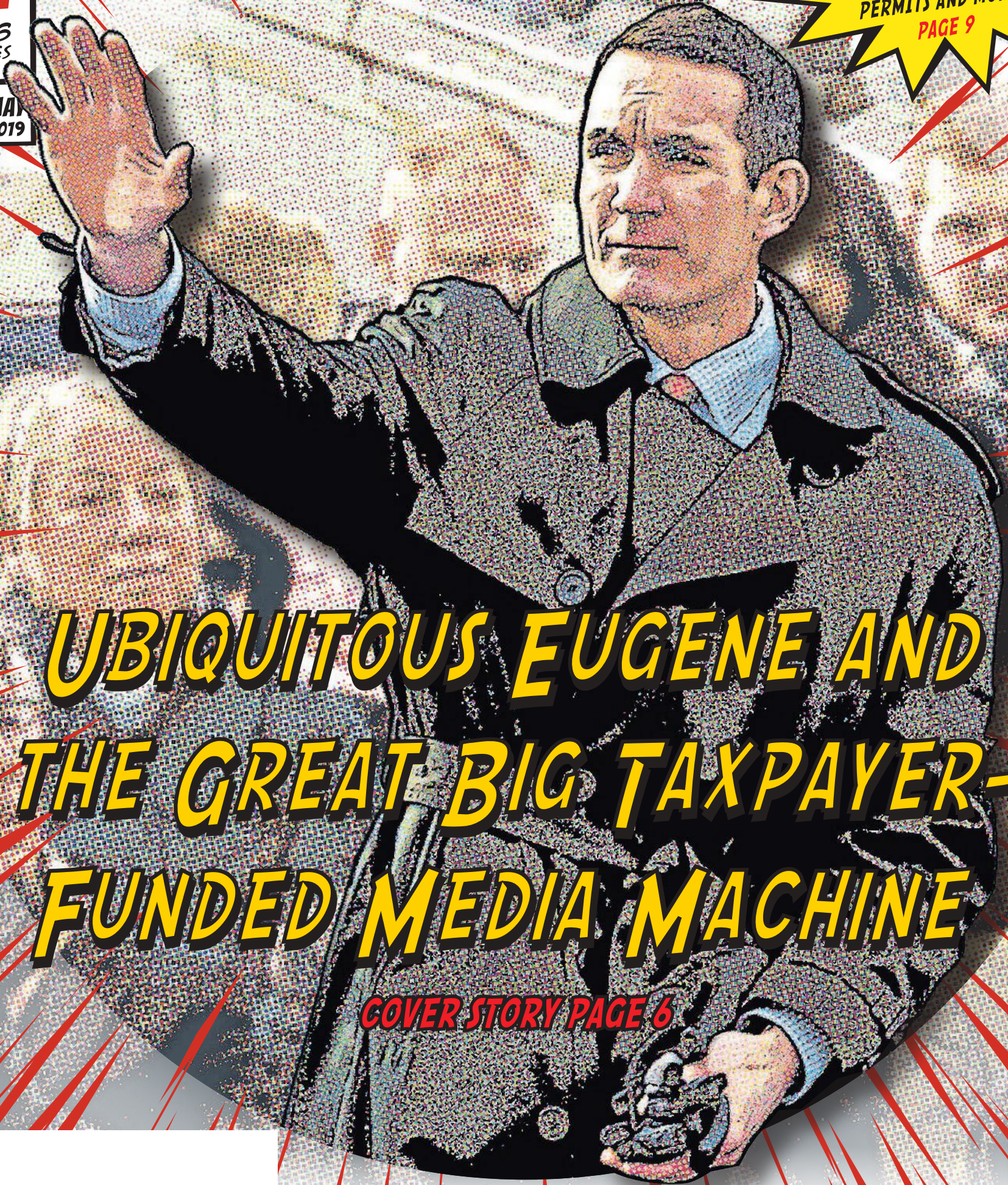


THE CAUCUS

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2019

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OF ITS POLITICAL CLOUT. PAGE 4

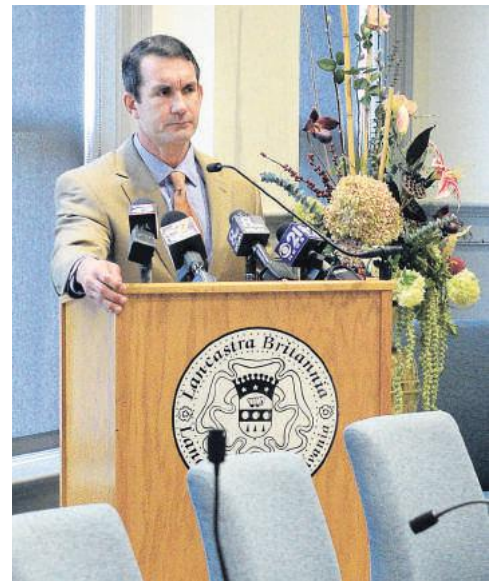
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COVER STORY

FLOODING THE ZONE



Eugene DePasquale is everywhere — your inbox, your TV, your newspaper, your fax machine. Is it too much?



» SAM JANESCH + BRAD BUMSTED



As the longest government shutdown in U.S. history unfolded late last year, President Donald Trump came under withering criticism from members of Congress, unpaid federal employees and an angry public. He also took it on the chin from some unexpected quarters. Including Eugene DePasquale's office.





COVER STORY

Pennsylvania's auditor general called Trump "shameful" and "weak" and demanded members of the far-right congressional Freedom Caucus stop being paid until the shutdown was over.

"We need adults in Washington to work in the best interest of all Americans," read the prepared statement issued by DePasquale's government office the day after Christmas.

What business, though, did this state's top bean-counter have wading into national politics?

DePasquale's office will tell you his job involves a lot more than scrutinizing how state and local agencies spend taxpayer money. He also is obligated to alert the public about the state of Pennsylvania's finances — a broad responsibility that, perhaps, could include the potential loss of federal money during a shutdown.

But that depends on who you ask.

Vincent Carocci, a former press secretary to the late Gov. Robert Casey, said DePasquale's news release "in the strictest sense" is unrelated to the auditor general's duties.

"It's a federal issue," he said.

Federal issue or state, DePasquale has developed a reputation among Capitol observers as being Harrisburg's most aggressive communicator since leaving his York County House seat for the state row office in 2013. DePasquale has made use of state resources to talk about everything from school district budgets to government shutdowns, financial missteps in the Capitol and federal hurricane aid to Puerto Rico.

Those resources include a five-person communications team with salaries totaling \$415,000 and heavy use of the Capitol Media Center, which is part of the Capitol Media Services' \$4.7 million operating budget. (Over the last two years, DePasquale has been the media center's most frequent user, state records show.)

That DePasquale has ambitions for higher office is no secret; he's weighing a run for Congress. So his use of the government megaphone for maximum exposure is certainly understandable.

But it also comes with risks: There's a fine line between carrying out the duties of a public office and using that public office for political gain.

DePasquale appears to walk right up to that line. Sometimes that line is a little blurry.

RUNNING FOR SOMETHING

DePasquale's fondness for the spotlight is similar to that of another likely aspirant to higher office, Attorney General and likely gubernatorial hopeful Josh Shapiro.

The Pennsylvania Republican Party has taken notice of both and is hitting them for their use of state resources to call attention to their work.

The GOP has alleged Shapiro, who has joined other states in suing the Trump administration, is using his office for "presidential harassment" and to "boost his personal political profile." And it is using the Right-to-Know Law to determine the cost to taxpayers of DePasquale's media events.

Office of Attorney General spokesman Joe Grace said the communications department's mission "is that of any other elected officials' communications shop — to keep constituents informed of the work of this agency through earned media and online platforms ... Attorney General Shapiro is focused on his job each day as the chief law enforcement officer of Pennsylvania — as are we."



BLAINE SHAHAN | FOR THE CAUCUS

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro announces additional charges regarding four victims in sexual assault investigation of Lancaster County doctor William Vollmar during a news conference in Harrisburg this month. The GOP has alleged Shapiro, who has joined other states in suing the Trump administration, is using his office for "presidential harassment" and to "boost his personal political profile."

nia — as are we."

While DePasquale wasn't available for an interview on the subject, he responded to a question about the GOP request during a news conference in York County.

"My job as auditor general is to basically not only find whatever may be wrong, but to go out and fight for change, whether it's getting rid of the backlog of untested rape kits, whether it's cracking down on 58,000 unanswered phone calls to the child abuse hotline, whether it's working to fix funding issues with school districts," he said. "That's my job. And my job is to disseminate that information and to be aggressive in doing it. And I will do it with every fiber of my being until my last day in office."

"I know sometimes people say I have a lot of press conferences, and that is true," DePasquale said. "And I think of all the faults that people could have in life, having too many press conferences is probably at the spectrum of, OK, that's not the worst evil in the world."

COST OF A COMMUNICATIONS CZAR

The auditor general is Pennsylvania's top fiscal watchdog. His job is to ensure taxpayer money is spent appropriately and transparently by state agencies, school districts, state-related and state-owned universities, district courts and children-and-youth agencies. His team reviews corporate tax returns, municipal pensions and federal funds spent by the state.

There's a lot on his plate.

His office claims he has identified almost \$1 billion in misspent funds across the state, saved more than \$3 million within the department, strengthened efforts to end child abuse and reduced the backlog of untested rape kits.

Press secretary Gary Miller said "a major part" of DePasquale's job also entails informing the public of issues that impact health, safety and the state's finances.

"He achieves this despite having sustained the largest reduction to his department's operating budget of any state auditor in the United States. In fact, the department's current staff count is half of what it was in 1996," Miller said.

The auditor general's office has 439 employees,

according to state records. Five of them are identified as communications staffers: the spokesman, Miller, as well as communications director Barry Ciccioppo and three "communications specialists." Their salaries total \$415,220.

DePasquale, who was the first state House member to put his expenses online for public inspection, also publishes his department's expenses online. The last full fiscal year it had a \$51 million budget, 80% of which went toward salaries and pensions. Of the total, \$400,000 went toward travel for the auditor general and his staff.

A 2018 Caucus investigation found DePasquale, who frequently crisscrosses the state to unveil his audits of local entities, had expensed \$12,000 for his own travel and meals over the course of one year.

Shapiro's personal expenses far exceeded that at \$90,000; his trips included the Aspen Institute Ideas Festival in Colorado, which served no apparent purpose to citizens of Pennsylvania.

In Harrisburg, Shapiro's and DePasquale's press teams frequently seek media coverage, efforts that are mostly about the work of their office. Their communications staffs spend time crafting and sending hundreds of news releases per year.

DePasquale's website has archived roughly 1,300 news statements since his 2013 swearing-in, and that's not counting even more that his office sent out for reporters' planning purposes. Shapiro's website has archived 572 statements since he entered office in 2017.

News conferences are another story.

It's unclear how many the two have held or joined at the request of lawmakers and advocacy groups. But within the designated room at the Capitol for such activities, the Capitol Media Center in the East Wing, DePasquale reigns supreme.

The media center's schedules for 2017 and 2018 show DePasquale used the facility far and away the most of any agency or individual lawmaker, according to the documents received in a Right-to-Know Law request.

He booked time in the media center 39 times. The runner-up: the Department of Health with 16 times.

Run through the Department of General Services, Capitol Media Services has a full-time staff of 24 employees. It budgeted \$4.5 million for staff salaries and benefits, software, hardware and other costs, while actually spending \$3.6 million in 2017-18, the last full fiscal year, according to state records. Its budget was set at \$4.7 million for this year.

The center also bills its users fees for things such as satellite time and staff overtime. DePasquale was billed more than other users of the center, with fees adding up to \$2,272 for those years, according to state records.

Shapiro booked the media center for only one event in those two years — the Aug. 14 news conference announcing his investigation into abuse within Pennsylvania's Catholic dioceses. His office's bill for that news conference was \$405, the largest of any of the 275 events there.

BLURRED LINES

When it comes to issuing news releases, DePasquale pushes the limits. He comments on a whole bunch of topics that appear to have little to do with his official responsibilities.

In September 2017, after Hurricane Maria devas-



I know sometimes people say I have a lot of press conferences, and that is true. And I think of all the faults that people could have in life, having too many press conferences is probably at the spectrum of, OK, that's not the worst evil in the world."

EUGENE DEPASQUALE
STATE AUDITOR GENERAL



tated Puerto Rico, DePasquale urged Congress to act faster in responding to the disaster.

When a Republican state House member tried to impeach the Democratic state Supreme Court justices over the redistricting case last year, DePasquale put out a statement calling “any attack on the judiciary ... an attack on the constitution itself.”

In March, DePasquale’s communications team described him in a news release as being “angered” about the effects of Trump’s emergency declaration to build his southern border wall.

He was angry not just at the “\$100 million in congressionally authorized funding for four military projects in Pennsylvania,” he went so far as to say he was angry at the constitutionality of the declaration and about the “unpopular and divisive border-wall plan.”

“Congress must stand up against this action because it sets a dangerous precedent,” DePasquale said.

On the other hand, he frequently provides updates on school district and municipal audits showing how tax dollars are spent — whether it’s the public pensions for the city of Monessen in Westmoreland County or a settlement with a former superintendent of the Manheim Township School District in Lancaster County.

He will start with an existing audit and go on to explain his own ideas about related policies — such as an audit of a Lehigh County charter school last year that he used to talk about a loophole in the state charter-school law.

And he will start with policy ideas and link them back to the financial impact on Pennsylvania and its taxpayers — such as a November special report he issued on firearm safety that laid out an entire policy platform while mentioning the \$1.5 billion in health care costs tied to Pennsylvania shootings over the last decade.

Still, there’s that blurred line between office duties and political gain.

The Dec. 26 news release — about withholding pay for the Freedom Caucus during the government shutdown — may be the clearest example. It reads like a campaign speech.

Is it just a coincidence that U.S. Rep. Scott Perry, who DePasquale is reportedly looking to challenge in 2020, is a member of the Freedom Caucus?

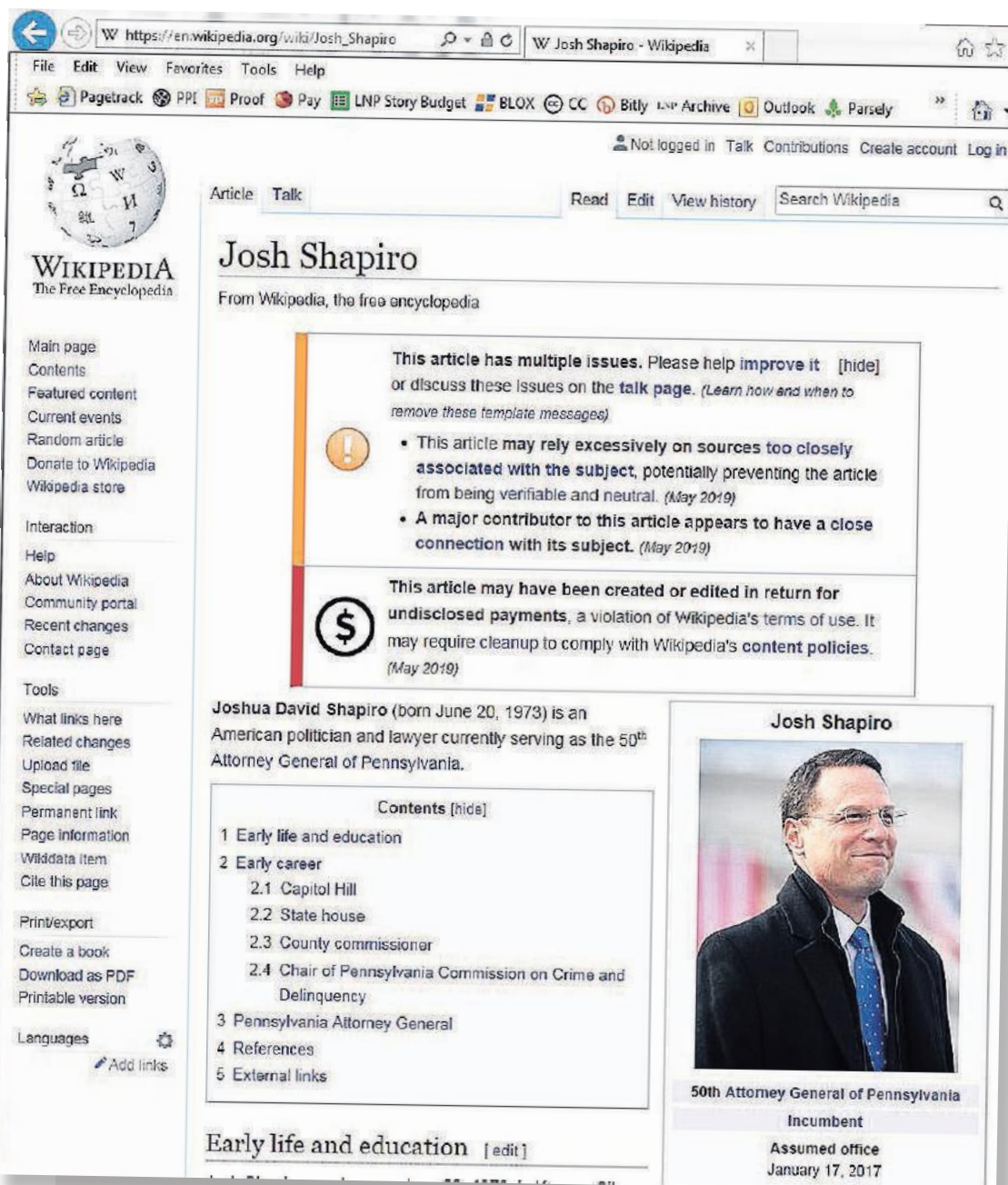
Perry’s campaign spokesman didn’t want to offer an opinion on that matter.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

DePasquale certainly isn’t the first elected official — or even the first auditor general, for that matter — to saturate the airwaves in the run-up to campaigning for higher office. Jack Wagner held repeated new conferences — he was fond of hammering the turnpike — before eventually seeking the Democratic gubernatorial nomination.

DePasquale is starting to open up about his desire to seek another public office once he completes his constitutionally limited two terms next year.

“Obviously Eugene is coming to the end of his term. He is looking at his political future,” said Philadelphia media



FLAGGED

Flattering profiles on Wikipedia may have violated site’s use terms

» CARTER WALKER + JUNIOR GONZALEZ

Even the internet was uncomfortable with all the fawning.

The Wikipedia community flagged a glowing bio of the Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro last week, pictured above, saying it may “rely excessively on sources too closely associated with the subject” and could have been written in return for payment, both of which violate its terms of use.

In Shapiro’s case, edits were made by a communications staffer.

Staffers for Auditor General Eugene DePasquale, Senate Minority Leader Jay Costa and Senate Majority Leader Jake Corman also made edits to their bosses’ pages. All their pages had been similarly flagged last week, too.

The flaggings followed reports by The Caucus and LNP, both publications of LNP Media Group in Lancaster, that taxpayer-paid staff for Shapiro, a potential candidate for governor in 2022, and other high-ranking state officials edit their boss’ Wikipedia pages, often in

highly flattering terms.

Shapiro’s staffer, who is paid \$65,526 a year after a recent raise of nearly \$12,000, described him as a “rising progressive star” who has “earned a reputation as a consensus builder eager to take on the status quo and challenge powerful institutions to protect the people of Pennsylvania.” He wrote that Shapiro is “guided by his faith” and “driven by the teachings of Scripture.”

The Wikimedia Foundation, which operates the collaborative online encyclopedia, requires editors disclose their “employer, client, and affiliation with respect to any contribution for which (they) receive, or expect to receive, compensation.”

None of the staffers disclosed those ties to their bosses.

Carter Walker and Junior Gonzalez cover government for LNP, the daily newspaper in Lancaster County. Walker can be reached at cwalker@lnpnews.com. Gonzalez can be reached at jgonzalez@lnpnews.com.

consultant Larry Ceisler, who is close to Democrats. “He is going to run for something. The only question is what?”

The likely options: the 10th Congressional District seat, which covers Har-

risburg and northern York County and is represented by Perry since 2013, and governor or U.S. Senate in 2022, when Gov. Tom Wolf leaves office and Republican U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey is up for a third

term.

The National Journal reported earlier this spring that DePasquale was laying the groundwork for a congressional bid. He told PoliticsPA that he wants to continue his public service and was taking the coming months to decide where that should be.

DePasquale publicly flirted with the same congressional seat in 2018 before deciding to pass.

Ceisler said Shapiro is expected to be a “formidable candidate” for governor. He’s guessing DePasquale will opt for either of the federal offices, though “you can’t count governor out.”

“He is very well-known and very well-liked across the state,” Ceisler said of DePasquale. “(Auditor general) is a tough job. You only have so much power. You can make all the recommendations you want. It takes someone else to implement them,” usually a state agency, lawmakers or the governor, Ceisler added.

QUANTITY VERSUS QUALITY?

Joe DiSarro, chairman of the political science department at Washington & Jefferson College, said there’s no question DePasquale has used his office to generate as much publicity as possible as part of his bid to run for an undisclosed higher office.

But DiSarro, a conservative Republican, was not condemnatory. He said DePasquale isn’t breaking new ground.

DiSarro said he believes DePasquale is being outperformed on “news management” by Shapiro.

It’s easier for Shapiro, the state’s top law enforcement officer, to get news coverage, or earned media, given the interest in the crime and law enforcement policies.

DiSarro cited Shapiro’s move to take on health care giant UPMC in litigation, which is of great concern to most western Pennsylvania citizens. And Shapiro’s stinging grand jury investigation of predator pedophile priests last year generated worldwide publicity.

When interviewed by The New York Times after the priest investigation, Shapiro was asked whether he would run for governor. He said he hoped his wife and kids would give him “the go-ahead to run for re-election” to his current post in 2020.

Charlie Gerow, a Republican media and political consultant, said his sense is DePasquale probably does hold more news conferences than anyone, but Shapiro isn’t far behind.

“Shapiro hasn’t seen a lawsuit he doesn’t want to glom onto and increase the tab for taxpayers,” Gerow said. “We want the auditor general and attorney general to do what they are doing, but sometimes they get carried away because of what is involved here ... running for higher office, governor, or Congress. “The problem with Eugene is some of the work he does is good work. But it’s not sexy,” Gerow added.

So he moves into other issues with better political fodder, he said. “If I were working for him, I would ask: What does the Office of Auditor General have to do with this topic?”