



THE CAUCUS

A WATCHDOG PUBLICATION OF LNP MEDIA GROUP, INC. | TUESDAY, JULY 10, 2018 | \$4.25

WAGNER'S WINGMAN

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL WITH REPUBLICAN LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR HOPEFUL JEFF BARTOS

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THE CLEANUP MAN

Scott Wagner is the bull in the china closet. Jeff Bartos, his running mate, is there to fix everything

» SAM JANESCH
+ BRAD BUMSTED

On the same recent June day when President Donald Trump told supporters in North Dakota he was “the smartest person ... smarter than anybody,” the Trump-like gubernatorial candidate in Pennsylvania was taking a different approach.

“You know, I have shortcomings,” Scott Wagner, the Republican nominee for governor who is often compared with the commander in chief, said after a campaign lunch of pulled pork at a barbecue joint in northeast Philadelphia.

Faced with so many problems if he wins, Wagner said he’s not always the best at communicating his message. He’s not, nor does he want to become, a “polished politician.”

But he did go out of his way to find somebody who could become one.

In November, Wagner announced Jeff Bartos as his unofficial running mate. Then a candidate to challenge Democratic U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, Bartos would make the switch to what is usually a far-less-coveted position.

Bartos — a 45-year-old lawyer and former “entrepreneur of the year” who cut his teeth in real estate during the worst housing crisis in a generation — would be Wagner’s lieutenant governor.

The Mike Pence to Pennsylvania’s Donald Trump, Bartos has become the chief translator for the top of the ticket. Where Wagner scowls and, as he says, can often come across as “really negative,” Bartos is the smiling cleanup act, the tension reliever, the articulate communicator. He’s the polished politician who’s never held elected office.

“People would say that I’m like a bull in a china closet,” Wagner said. “OK, well I can go in the china closet and you’re going to hear dishes break, but Jeff’s outside saying, ‘Don’t worry, it will be OK. You’re going to hear dishes break. He’ll be out. It’ll all be OK.’”

And even though experienced political observers say lieutenant governor candidates have little to no effect on the outcome of gubernatorial races, Pennsylvania Republicans are betting on this pair of stylistically different outsiders to come through with a historic upset.

“They do have different styles,” said U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey. “Scott is more brash. Jeff is a little more reserved. That’s the nature of their personalities, but they’re both really smart guys who want to accomplish big things for Pennsylvania.”

‘I WAS ANGRY’

Bartos may be the affable, smiling,



SAM JANESCH | THE CAUCUS

Republican lieutenant governor nominee Jeff Bartos, left, and gubernatorial nominee Scott Wagner, right, meet with campaign supporters for an early breakfast at Michael’s Family Restaurant and Diner in Bensalem, Bucks County, on June 27.

gentler half of the ticket, but his political ambitions were born out of anger.

It began in the summer of 2015. The Obama Administration was moving ahead with the Iran nuclear deal, paving the way for what some said meant \$150 billion in benefits to Iran while restricting its nuclear program.

Bartos, who is involved philanthropically in Israel, went to Capitol Hill to lobby Pennsylvania’s congressional delegation, including Sen. Bob Casey, to oppose the deal because he believed it endangered the U.S., Israel and diplomatic relations between the two.

“That was such a betrayal of not only our safety and security but the safety and security of our allies,” Bartos said. “I said, ‘If somebody doesn’t step forward and challenge him (Casey) when he’s up for re-election, I’m going to have to do it. Like, I have to do it. Someone’s got to. He can’t get away with this.’ I was angry.”

His passion and his desire to step up didn’t go unnoticed. At the end of 2015, as he was floating his name for the 2018 Senate race, some suggested he consider the House district that covered parts of Lancaster, Berks and Chester counties. U.S. Rep. Joe Pitts was retiring after two decades, and while Bartos lived outside

the district — in Lower Merion, Montgomery County — he had grown up in the 16th and still had family connections there.

He submitted his name to the Lancaster GOP for at least early consideration for the endorsement but he balked when it became clear that then-state Sen. Lloyd Smucker had the local support.

Without a campaign of his own, Bartos spent 2016 as a “tireless advocate” and fundraiser for Toomey’s re-election efforts throughout the southeast part of the state and Lehigh Valley.

“I have a very high opinion of Jeff,” said Toomey, who described Bartos as a family man and successful businessman who has a “tremendous work ethic.”

Toomey said Bartos had been helpful in making connections to eventual supporters in Montgomery County and throughout the southeast part of the state during his campaigns. He said he also has sought Bartos’ advice on business-related matters and security issues such as the Iran deal.

In the Republican presidential primary cage fight, U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz was his man — mostly because they shared friends in common but also because Bar-

tos thought he was “brilliant,” a “very sharp man” who believed in “free market capitalism and economic growth.”

He said transitioning to Trump as the party’s nominee wasn’t difficult, though he says he followed Toomey’s lead in keeping his head down — focusing on the Senate race while “staying away from the daily emotional swings.” Toomey notably kept quiet about who he would personally vote for in the months leading up to the election, only saying after he cast his ballot that he chose Trump.

The strategies — from abandoning the congressional campaign to taking the Toomey route — paid off. Bartos attended Toomey’s swearing-in at the Capitol and on the same day hand-delivered an invitation for Smucker to visit Israel, a routine trip for the freshmen.

A TASTE FOR POLITICS

Bartos grew up in the suburbs of Reading — where his grandfather opened a podiatry practice in the late 1930s and where his father joined about 35 years later. He never felt pressured to join the family business, but he would’ve liked to have been a doctor if he hadn’t



COVER STORY

failed to grasp chemistry and calculus.

Instead, he gravitated toward law.

“I love American history. I love constitutional law,” he said. “My dad would tell you, back in high school, he’d come into my bedroom and I’d be reading Supreme Court cases or books about the Burger court or The Brethren and stuff like that.”

He smiled as he described how he was a junior at Lancaster Country Day School when his congressman, U.S. Rep. Bob Walker, secured tickets for his whole class to attend George H.W. Bush’s inauguration in 1989. Ronald Reagan had been “iconic,” but Bartos said he didn’t know then that he’d later fit the Reagan Republican mold as a candidate himself.

He went on to major in political science at Emory University in Atlanta, then on to University of Virginia Law School, where he met his future wife, Sheryl, who was getting her master’s degree in education. He graduated in May 1997 and they married six months later. Two daughters came later — Emily in 2000 and Sarah in 2002.

After a clerkship with federal Judge A. Richard Caputo in Scranton, they moved to Philadelphia and later Lower Merion, as he went into corporate litigation at Montgomery, McCracken, Walker & Rhoads.

He also started getting involved in local politics, joining the Montgomery County Republican Committee and writing checks for local and statewide candidates.

“I remember when a \$50 check was a big deal for me — for us I mean,” said Bartos, who kick-started both his Senate and his lieutenant governor campaigns last year with roughly \$500,000 loans. Both have since been repaid.

His involvement in larger-scale politics, though, didn’t kick in until he met Toomey. Bartos saw him as a true conservative, a “super smart” and talented candidate who was well-read and in tune to the kind of free-market principles Bartos admired.

“He really helped restore a lot of my faith that smart, capable, principled people could rise up and do a good job and achieve these positions,” Bartos said.

Since Bartos and his wife started giving to federal candidates in 2011, Toomey has become their top candidate. They’ve donated \$7,400 to him and \$28,733 total to candidates for federal office, according to campaign finance reports.

They’ve given \$38,385 to state-level campaigns, some of which included Democrats, according to state campaign finance data. The Bartos’ gave \$425 to Ed Rendell’s first gubernatorial campaign in 2002, \$250 to a Democratic state Senate campaign in 2000 and \$750 to Attorney General Josh Shapiro’s campaign in 2016. They’ve also given to U.S. Rep. Dwight Evans’ 2016 congressional campaign and \$1,000 to the federal Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in 2011.

A Wagner-Bartos campaign spokesman said: “These few donations were made at the request of friends or business associates and do not in any way reflect Jeff’s ideological agreement with these candidates.”

LEARNING REAL ESTATE

Bartos’ increasing campaign donations came alongside several promotions.

He joined the homebuilders Toll Brothers in 2001 as a lawyer and was promoted to manage 145 employees on the business side right before Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005, which he said marked the decline in the housing industry. The economy tanked as he learned the home-construction business. His division included Chester and Delaware counties, the entire state of Delaware and the eastern shore of Maryland.

The Maryland piece, as a second-home vacation market, was “decimated,” but the rest of his territory was buoyed by good school districts. And they cut costs, made layoffs. His division, he says, was profitable every quarter until he was recruited by a British company in 2010 to run its U.S. operations.

The Mark Group charged him with opening an office at Philadelphia Navy Yard and developing a national footprint.

“The fancy word would be energy efficiency retrofits of homes,” Bartos said. “That’s a fancy way of (saying) insulating lots of old houses, putting in replacement windows, doing solar.”

The Rendell administration offered \$3.28 million in tax credits and loans. As CEO, Bartos grew the group to nearly 200 employees and opened offices in New Jersey and Maryland. In June 2014, he was named an Ernst & Young “entrepreneur of the year” for greater Philadelphia.

But once again Bartos was in for a challenge. A change in United Kingdom energy policy put the parent company’s operations at home in a dire position. The company was forced to shutter offices abroad by the end of the year.

“I can’t spin it into being good news. It was horrible. It was a terrible time for everybody,” said Bartos, who bought out a portion of the remaining operations to finish out some projects in early 2015.

Since then, he’s gone back to what he did in his early days at Toll — buying land, taking it through the entitlement process and then selling it to builders. He also has partners developing multi-family homes.

If he becomes lieutenant governor, he said he’d step aside and give control to his partners and his wife, who is involved and has stepped up since he started the campaign.

“I’m impressed,” said David Taylor, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Manufacturers’ Association. “He is a successful businessman. Jeff helps in the political arena. He does not need this job.”

JOINING FORCES

As he started reconsidering running against Casey in early 2017, Bartos paid his way through various Republican committee events and quickly met Wagner, who had launched his gubernatorial bid right after the 2016 election.

Bartos didn’t formally declare his Senate campaign until April 2017. And within a month or two, Wagner was already putting on the moves.

“He said, ‘It’s a shame you’re running for the Senate,’” Bartos recalled Wagner saying as early as May.

But perhaps like many who are hoping for a seat in Congress, Bartos’ immediate reaction to the thought of running for lieutenant governor was to say, “No thanks. The job doesn’t really have a lot of responsibility.” Wagner assured him that he had “a different view of the world.”

The pair continued talking over the summer, as Republican U.S. Rep. Lou Barletta, a Trump favorite, joined Bartos in the Senate race.

“At that point there was definitely pressure on me to step aside,” Bartos said, referring to party leaders and fundraisers across the state. So, for the second time in two years, Bartos thought about withdrawing to pave the way for a more experienced candidate who shared his values.

Wagner and Bartos met for dinner in Lancaster in the early fall — and then again with their wives — to talk about what a joint ticket would look like. Such a move is a rarity in Pennsylvania, where gubernatorial and lieutenant governor candidates run separately in the primary and then become one ticket in November. The antiquated process is what some have said led to Lt. Gov. Mike Stack’s frosty relationship with Gov. Tom Wolf in the last few years.

Wagner was promising a new kind of governor-lieutenant governor relationship.

“I need a partner,” he told Bartos. “I need someone I know that can take responsibility for agencies, take responsibility for policy areas, and I know that since you and I have worked together, by the time we’re sworn in, we’ll have worked together for 15 months, 14 months, side by side so there’s no learning curve. ... It’s not like we have to figure things out.”

Bartos came home from the second dinner and made the decision that night.

THE WINGMAN

It’s a quarter-past 11 a.m. on a late-June Wednesday in Warminster, Bucks County, and Bartos is sitting in the back seat of one of the campaign’s black Chevy Tahoes with a reporter. He’s been here for seven minutes, waiting for Wagner to make his way out of the mulching business where both of them just spent the last hour sitting down with employees.

“Where’s Scott?” Bartos asks a campaign staffer. They’re on a tight schedule, and, as usual, Wagner is missing. “He’s very social. It’s funny. (If) there’s 300 people at an event, he’ll meet with every one and spend real time with people. First one there, last one to leave. He’s not your typical politician.”

More than seven months after they joined forces, Bartos is relentlessly on message. And that’s part of the reason why, of course, Wagner wanted him on his team.

“Jeff is very more articulate on issues than I am,” Wagner said. “We understand the issues inside and out. He’s in some ways better off communicating those issues, maybe on the surface and so people get it.”

That relationship in action is one of compliments and complements. Bartos ensures not only clarity and focus but also levity.

Over a morning and afternoon of campaigning, he often butted in with supportive remarks and jokes — a rare trait for the man at the top of the ticket.

At the meeting with the mulching company, Victory Garden Inc., Wagner talked about the workers-comp issues he dealt with at Penn Waste and about the permitting problems he would solve at the Department of Environmental Protection.

Bartos gently shifted the conversation back to the campaign, saying they were close to Wolf and John Fetterman

— closer than the public polling so far had suggested. But the primaries had depleted their campaign cash, and the very tangible need they had was for funding.

Earlier in the day, at a Bucks County diner for breakfast with supporters, Wagner sternly quizzed the group on what they thought his “zero-based budgeting” idea meant. Bartos cut in to lighten the mood.

“I am thinking of course that my daughters would prefer the government model (of more spending) than the zero-based budgeting model,” Bartos cracked, getting laughs before saying Wagner’s budget strategy was another way he would be a “serious disruptor” who would shake up the culture in Harrisburg.

As they meet with supporters, even their outward appearances seem to complement each other. The 62-year-old Wagner goes tieless with a sports coat. Bartos — the man who’s completed seven marathons and two Ironman triathlons (2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike and 26.2-mile run) — goes with the light-blue tie and without a jacket.

Supporters and pundits recognize the effectiveness of their dynamic.

Liz Preate Havey, chair of the Montgomery County Republican Committee, said they combine their strengths to form an “excellent ticket.”

Kevin Shivers, executive director of the National Federation of Independent Business in Pennsylvania, said he sees Bartos as a major boost.

“He is a conservative making major inroads in southeastern Pennsylvania,” Shivers said.

“Jeff is in complete synch with Scott Wagner’s agenda. Compare that to Fetterman and Wolf. Fetterman is a self-described Socialist,” Shivers said.

Wes Leckrone, a political science professor at Widener University, said that while voter familiarity with lieutenant governor candidates is usually low, there is a net positive to having Bartos on the ticket.

“They share a common identity as business outsiders and have a concerted message that they are going to bring their business savvy to state government to disrupt and cause change,” Leckrone said. “This common identity and message is an advantage for Wagner’s campaign.”

Others, however, said it’s unclear how the more unknown candidate — compared with, say, Fetterman on the Democratic side — will impact the race, if at all.

“I know virtually nothing about him. I know more about a stalk of corn in a field,” said T.J. Rooney, former Democratic Party chairman and a Bethlehem-based political consultant. He says he didn’t mean it “in a disparaging way about Bartos. ... All I know is they (Bartos and Wagner) ran as a team.”

Among themselves, Bartos and Wagner pride themselves on being aligned ideologically.

Wagner has asked Bartos to be his voice on education (more parental choice and vouchers, for example) and economic development (overhauling state regulations and permitting procedures).

If they win, Wagner said he expects they might split up the state agencies in the first 90 days to communicate changes coming their way.

“It’s pretty scary what has to be done,” Wagner said. “He’s going to have my back, and I’m going to have his back.”