

LOCAL

Unknowns before 2020, leaders in the reopen movement have the Bucks County GOP's attention



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The highest-profile members of the COVID-era movement to challenge state and local COVID-19 restrictions are still making plenty of noise. And national conservative organizations, Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano, and the Bucks County GOP are listening — perhaps like never before.

The pandemic made names for, and conservative media darlings out of, Bucks County residents Jamie Cohen Walker and Megan Brock as, starting in 2020, they decried the government's "unwarranted and harmful" COVID response, which was typified by school closures, mask mandates and business shutdowns.

Along with ReOpen Bucks co-founder Josh Hogan, their early influence was largely at school board meetings and on social media. People began paying attention as the criticism grew and they took on decision makers and demanded answers.

Calling out the Bucks County GOP

The Bucks County Republican Committee seemed to keep the Walker, Brock and Josh Hogan at arm's length in early 2021, even though watchdogging government interference in citizens' lives has long been a GOP hallmark.

Early 2021 was when Walker, who lives in Chalfont, appeared on one of this newspaper's podcasts to criticize the Central Bucks School District's decision to close schools to in-person learning in August 2020. Around the same time, Brock, who is from Northampton, penned a guest opinion about school closings entitled "Forgive us, children, for not fighting harder"

and West Rockhill's Hogan — ripped "CDC misguidance" related to schools on his group's blog.

"I think the party was involved (in opposing COVID-related mandates) but school boards are seen as nonpolitical," Bucks County Republican Committee Chair Pat Poprik said when asked about the party's level of activism on the topic.

Brock and Hogan, however, sent the Bucks GOP a clear "thanks for nothing" message on Aug. 31, 2021, when it announced on Facebook that the Wolf administration would require masking in schools to start the 2021-2022 school year.

"It's hard to put into words just how feckless and weak you are, Bucks County Republican Committee," Hogan said in a comment on the Bucks GOP's Facebook post. "Why don't you get the hell out of the way, so that real men and women can fight? Since you obviously never will."

In another comment on the same thread, Brock called the Bucks County GOP "completely worthless."

"If we saw even a glimmer of a heartbeat from the GOP I think we'd all feel a lot more positive. You've given us nothing. We will have to find and align ourselves with other candidates. You are losing our vote."

An evolving relationship in Bucks County politics

At a moment in which the Republican Party in Bucks County is locked in a struggle between its more-moderate members and a more-conservative segment embodied by Andy Meehan's RightForBucks splinter group, the relationship between the Bucks GOP and Brock, Hogan and Walker seems to be evolving.

In July, the committee, on its Facebook page, shared this newspaper's editorial arguing that the county should turn certain records over to Brock and Walker. The Bucks GOP said it was joining the newspaper's call for the commissioners to stop appealing court decisions that ordered the county to release requested emails.

Then, last month, the Bucks GOP called on Eric Nagy to resign from his post as Bucks County's head of policy and communications based on information Walker, Brock and Hogan provided to conservative magazine the National Review.

More: Who authored Bucks County's COVID guidelines?

The trio told the National Review it found metadata listing Nagy as the "author" of a document that shifted the county health department's guidance to schools from mask-optional to mask-required for the start of the 2021-2022 school year. Brock, Hogan, Walker and others in the reopen movement have long suspected that Bucks County Health Department Director Dr. David Damsker was cut out of the August 2021 decision to recommend masks be required for students.

Without specifically addressing the guidance document, Nagy told the National Review that he is "responsible for and routinely involved with, reviewing and disseminating information to the public." Around the same time, county spokesman James T. O'Malley issued a nearly identical statement to the Delaware Valley Journal. The DV Journal is an online news and opinion publication of insidesources.com, founded in 2014 by the former communications director for Mitt Romney's presidential campaign in Iowa.

The name in the metadata lists as "author" the person who created the digital file, but there is no way to track who actually wrote the content. In some cases, the author field may not accurately reflect who wrote the words it contains, the county said.

It may also be worth noting that the county guidance wasn't binding. School districts could ignore it if they chose to. Also the county's guidance was essentially rendered meaningless just a week later when the Wolf administration stepped in and ordered masks to be worn inside K-12 school buildings, citing rising infection numbers attributable to the Delta variant.

Either way, Poprik signaled her support for Walker, Brock and Hogan after the National Review story dropped when she called for Nagy's resignation.

"If this is true, as the evidence presented suggests, it represents a significant overreach by a political operative and a violation of the trust voters have in our county government," Poprik said in her statement. "Parents rightfully expect these kinds of decisions to be made by public health professionals, not former campaign staffers."

While it's true that Poprik has long objected to the hiring of Nagy, who managed the successful 2019 campaigns of Democratic commissioners Diane-Ellis Marseglia and Bob Harvie, the statement also followed a summer sit-down between Poprik and reopen advocates.

During that meeting, which Poprik believes Hogan requested, the parents gave the GOP a detailed look at what they were doing.

"I don't think any of us thought there was a hatchet to bury," Poprik said when asked if the meeting had a "bury-the-hatchet" feel. "We just were finding out more information and we're supportive of their efforts."

It was not long after that meeting that Poprik's August statement formalized that support.

"We agree with what they're asking for and I think we'll be able to work with them on things we agree on," said Poprik, who noted she didn't know of any particular issue where they'd have to part company. "We're in lockstep. We don't think the county should be doing what it's doing (regarding Brock's and Walker's Right-to-Know requests)."

Hogan and Brock declined to be interviewed for this story. Walker emailed a statement that steered clear of topics related to the county GOP and the trio's growing influence, beyond suggesting she and her colleagues have been on the right side of the debate.

In a follow-up interview, Walker acknowledged being present for the meeting but indicated she doesn't care much about the inner workings of the Bucks GOP. She characterized herself as a politically moderate, stay-at-home mom of three school-aged children who, until COVID, didn't know how to submit a Right-to-Know request.

Now she's a stay-at-home mom with literally thousands upon thousands of email communications between a host of school district, county and state officials that leave her convinced that politics played an outsized role in keeping children home from school.

"It's always been my thing that the kids needed to be in school," said Walker, who comes from a family of teachers. "None of this was making sense to me."

Right for conservative media

The same day that the National Review reported the metadata discovery — Aug. 17 — Brock called in to The Rich Zeoli Show on Talk Radio 1210 WPHT in Philadelphia to discuss what she framed as the Pennsylvania State Education Association's push to keep schools remote in 2021-2022.

Two days later, she joined another WPHT host — Dom Giordano — on his "Readin', Writin' and Reason" education-focused podcast to talk about the National Review story, a topic she revisited the following week on Giordano's Aug. 23 radio show. That same day, she spent more than 15 minutes on AM 990 The Answer chatting with Philadelphia's Morning Answer host Chris Stigall on a range of topics, including her opposition to the campaigns of Josh

Judicial Watch in her own Bucks County Right-to-Know cases. It wasn't her first time with any of those hosts.

Walker isn't new at this either. She has authored or been featured in pieces published by RealClearEducation, the Commonwealth Foundation and Broad + Liberty, all of which lean to the right, politically. She has talked about she and Brock's work on Fox News' Fox & Friends and on The Megyn Kelly Show, which airs on SiriusXM.

"They randomly called me," Walker said of the producers of Fox & Friends. "I still don't know where they got my phone number....There wasn't anything to prepare. I just told the story. I did this every day."

It's no surprise that Brock and Walker get on the air or in the media so frequently, said Giordano in a recent interview. Damsker had been a frequent, popular and outspoken guest who suddenly went silent and Walker and Brock were the people putting forth an explanation for why that was the case. He added that Walker's and Brock's relentless use of the Right-to-Know law to obtain emails between Bucks County's key players works as a hedge against attacks on their credibility.

"Megan Brock is particularly good," Giordano said. "She's detailed, she's buttoned-up....it's a flawless presentation and the vetting is intense."

Brock and Walker's brand — suburban moms of school-aged children at odds with the government — and story resonate, at least with conservatives, beyond Bucks County's borders.

"I think we will see more of this," said Giordano.

He added, though, that for now it only seems to be happening with this level of intensity in purple Bucks County and that, he said, could be part of their appeal.

The story certainly appeals to Republican gubernatorial candidate State Sen. Doug Mastriano, of Franklin County, who's apparently keeping Walker and Brock on his radar.

More: Mastriano says Dems 'meddled' in Bucks County COVID guidelines. County calls claim 'pathetic'

“It’s no surprise that a Democratic operative thought he knew better than the director of the Bucks County Health Department when it came to school masking policies. It’s clear that a coordinated effort to force students to wear masks unfolded thanks to a rogue county staffer

and pressure from the Pennsylvania Department of Health,” Mastriano said in an Aug. 31 statement issued from the Senate Republican Communications Office.

Is there a master plan?

Their critics have suggested this isn't about masks, school closures or who authored what guidance. At least not anymore.

After a blistering public comment period that featured Walker and Brock, as well as others, during the Sept. 7 Bucks County Board of Commissioners meeting, board chairman Robert J. Harvie Jr. made this statement:

"I appreciate the people who have come out here and are looking for something other than just political gains, looking to take over a party, looking to spread disinformation and sow division in our county," Harvie said. "We've seen a lot of that in our country. It is deeply concerning and troubling to see people being manipulated by people within our own county."

Watch: Bucks County Board of Commissioners meeting Sept. 7

Speaking about Walker and Brock, who became a Northampton Township Republican committeewoman in May, Harvie later said he was uncertain of their endgame.

"I'm not sure what their goals are, but if you look at it, (reopen movement leaders) were in districts that didn't follow the (health department) guidance anyway," he said. "You have to ask 'Is it really about guidance, or were they trying to tap into an issue that people cared about?'"

Admittedly, that's politics, he said.

"Both parties have to try to harness the energy of people on some level," Harvie said. "But you don't want to hitch your wagon to something you can't control. You have to decide 'How do you want to win elections?'. Do you want to do it in a way that is damaging to the fabric of the community?"

And that's a question that Poprik may well hear if the Bucks GOP deepens its ties with those who as recently as last summer called it "feckless", "weak" and "completely worthless."

"I'd imagine it's very difficult to be in charge of the Bucks GOP right now when there's a contingent growing that wants to push it to the right," Harvie said.

Hogan and Brock declined to be interviewed for this story, but Walker didn't mince words.

"I have no interest in politics," she said. "I just want kids to be left alone and to be able to go to school and live as normally as possible."