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INQUIRER SPECIAL REPORT

Pennsylvania ever bluer ... and redder

Analysis of 2018 returns shows an acceleration of the state's voters separating into partisan camps.

By Jonathan Lai
and Jared Whalen
STAFF WRITERS

Pennsylvania is a state divided. That was made strikingly clear last November. Most people think they know the story of that midterm election, as Democrats rode a "blue wave" to convincing victories. But at the same time, a less-noticed opposing force — a red response — solidified the Republican base in rural areas.

An analysis of returns from

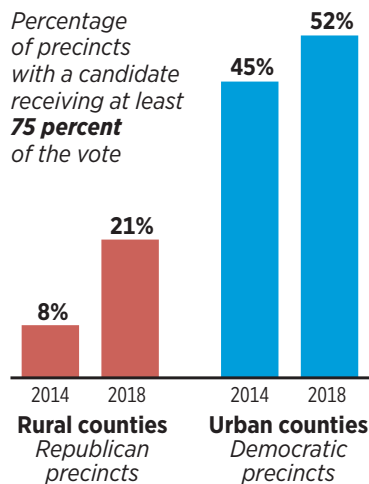
the state's more than 9,000 precincts in 2018, recently available for the first time, along with other data from previous elections, shows an acceleration of the years-long trend of Pennsylvania voters pulling apart from one another, separating into partisan camps along visible geographic divides.

The resulting portrait: Urban areas are the core of the Democratic base, but their adjacent suburbs are becoming a wider

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Pennsylvania's Rural-Urban Divide

Between 2014 and 2018 in races for governor, more precincts in the state's most rural counties gave overwhelming majorities to Republican candidates, a trend that was mirrored to a lesser extent for Democratic candidates in the most urban counties.



DIGITAL BILLBOARDS

Ad placements cross new municipal frontier

By Jacob Adelman
STAFF WRITER

The Chester County city of Coatesville is getting a new public amphitheater for its community jazz programs, local school productions, and summer music performances.

But for the theater's builder,

outdoor-advertising veteran Thaddeus Bartkowski, the venue's headline act will be the three digital screens — the largest of them 40 feet wide — that make up the covered stage's outer wall, facing the busy corner of Lincoln Highway and

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Artist's rendering of amphitheater planned for Coatesville.

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Private funding for public projects

SCREENS from A1 First Avenue.

The Coatesville amphitheater is among the first projects planned by Bartkowski’s new Newtown Square company, Catalyst Experiential LLC, which has deals to build everything from a police station to a fancy dog park for towns all over the Philadelphia area in exchange for the right to broadcast ads on big screens that come with the projects.

While cash-strapped cities were already turning with increasing frequency to private funding sources for their public offerings — think “Indego” bike share network and “NRG” subway station — Bartkowski is taking the trend to a new extreme, building ad-supported municipal structures from scratch.

To him, it’s a public service, bridging the gap between what citizens want from their cities and towns and what their governments are able to provide. It’s an “unrealistic expectation,” Bartkowski said, “to take a position that my municipality is going to be able to provide the highest and the best of everything that I, as a resident, could benefit from.”

Public agencies have been relying on ad revenue for at least as long as transit networks have sold off space on buses and trains for companies to hawk their products to commuters, but the approach has grown increasingly common in the years since the Great Recession, which depleted municipal coffers, said Adie Tomer, a fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, D.C.

Throughout central Philadelphia, hundreds of trash cans have been installed and are maintained by Needham, Mass.-based Bigbelly Inc., financed by ads on the bins. And Interstate Outdoor Advertising LP of Cherry Hill has sought permission to drape big billboards on two Center City municipal buildings.

Philadelphia’s city government also partners with Independence Blue Cross on the Indego bike-share program, while New York has its privately run Citigroup Inc.-funded CitiBike network.

Intersection, a New York-based media company, sets up cities including Philadelphia, New York, and Newark with wireless internet networks using ad-supported kiosks, while Loom Media LLC, a division of world-wide advertising and public relations giant WPP PLC, is working to put ad screens on electric-vehicle-charging stations in cities and towns.

“There is absolutely movement, from a built-environment perspective, to figure out how to have better public-private partnerships in the U.S. marketplace,” said Tomer, who leads Brookings’ metropolitan infrastructure research initiative. “A lot of it gets down to how can we improve fiscal balance sheets for governments, while still delivering the same — if not increased — value to the public.”

The services and amenities don’t come without a price, though, said Kristen Strader, a campaign coordinator with left-leaning consumer advocacy group Public Citizen. She characterized the trend as an intrusion of



Artist’s rendering of the entrance to a dog park planned by Catalyst Experiential for Bensalem.

An aerial view of the planned dog park, expected to feature grooming stalls, a swimming pool, and an obstacle course.

private interests onto public space that bombards people with more messages encouraging uncritical consumption.

“Hopefully we can all have nice dog parks,” she said. But it’s “not worth the trade-off of being inundated with even more advertising than we already have coming at us every single day of our lives.”

Strader said she was particularly troubled by what may be interpreted as an implicit endorsement of products by the government agencies and services that the ads support.

But it may be just such a connection to civic life that companies are seeking when they embrace opportunities to sponsor things like bike-share networks, said Mark Boidman, head of New York-based investment bank P.J. Solomon’s media and technology services division.

“It’s hard to stand out today. It’s hard to reach your audience,” said Boidman, who advises buyers and sellers of outdoor-advertising firms and other media companies. “Everybody today is focused on improving city life with things that are attractive and helpful.”

Bartkowski started Catalyst Experiential after selling most of the signs owned by his earlier company, Catalyst Outdoor Advertising, to Clear Channel Outdoor Inc. of

San Antonio, Texas, and Baton Rouge, La.-based Lamar Advertising Co., reportedly for \$85 million to \$95 million.

At the earlier company, Bartkowski struck deals with cities to buy, landscape, and maintain disused or blighted properties within their borders in exchange for permission to erect digital screens at the plots, where advertisements and public service announcements can be displayed.

Catalyst Outdoor has built such “monuments,” as he calls them, in Quakertown, Westtown, and Concord. Permits to build another in Paoli were denied by Tredyffrin Township officials amid opposition by neighbors.

With his new company, Bartkowski said he’s aiming to do more than just tidy up unseemly parts of town and to “create a use that the people that live and work in that municipality want and would benefit from,” he said.

Catalyst’s first project will be a \$2.5 million dog park in Bensalem, Bucks County, that will feature grooming stalls, a swimming pool, an obstacle course, and separate pens for different-sized canines when it is completed this fall. Its entrance will be marked by large digital screens under bone-shaped canopies, which will be visible to drivers passing the park’s entrance on Street Road, near Old Lincoln Highway.

“It will be the most elaborate dog park in the United States,” Bartkowski said.

Bartkowski said he’s also building a police station, an emergency medical services building, and pedestrian bridges in Pennsylvania and New Jersey commu-

nities around Philadelphia but declined to share their exact locations until the plans are farther along.

Within Philadelphia itself, meanwhile, Bartkowski is hoping to pioneer Catalyst’s approach to dense city centers with what it calls its Urban Experiential Display, a type of high-resolution, customized panel that can mimic three-dimensional textures, similar to the massive screens in the lobby of the Comcast Center building.

The company has a deal for a display on a blank exterior wall of the publicly owned Pennsylvania Convention Center at Broad and Race Streets, as well as for one on a private property on the southwest corner of 12th and Arch Streets, across the street from Reading Terminal Market.

City legislation has been passed to allow those screens, but they still require Pennsylvania Department of Transportation approval and have not yet been presented to the city’s arts commission and Civic Design Review board, which are steps in its permitting process, Bartkowski said.

The Philadelphia-area projects are part of a planned East Coast rollout that is expected to in-

clude efforts in Florida, Connecticut, and New York state this year, with plans to begin operating on the West Coast in 2020.

In Coatesville, where Catalyst is building the amphitheater, city manager Michael Trio said officials have long wanted to offer residents a more refined meeting place for town events than the bare, grassy plot where the

venue is planned, but it has lacked the means to do so.

Catalyst’s plan for the site calls for gently inclining semicircular grass terraces where up to 200 people can sit facing a stage structure and a separate building with public restrooms, all maintained through advertising revenue from the project.

The venue will remain publicly owned, although the digital screens themselves will be placed under Cat-

alyst’s long-term control, said Trio, who characterized the arrangement as a “win-win” for residents.

“We’ve been running a deficit for a few years. We’re working very hard to keep costs low,” he said. ““We have to be a little more out-of-the-box here.”

“There is absolutely movement ... to figure out how to have better public-private partnerships in the U.S. marketplace. A lot of it gets down to how can we improve fiscal balance sheets for governments, while still delivering the same — if not increased — value to the public.”

Adie Tomer, a fellow at the Brookings Institution