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Group says it's not opposed to scholarships

Members argue that they object only to selling sewers to fund plan; competing issues on ballot

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On Thursday, more than eight months after this group gathered to share concerns about the sale and or lease of the Akron sewer system, it came together again at East Akron Community House, this time to clear up what members believe is a misconception.

"We've never been against funding scholarships. We're against the privatization of our sewer system," said Cathy Gordon, who sat at a table with a dozen other members of Citizens to Save Our Sewers and Water (SOS). Many around the table wore SOS' signature neon green T-shirts with a water faucet on the front.

Weeks after Mayor Don Plusquellic proposed funding a scholarship plan for Akron students by leveraging the value of the city sewers, SOS was formed to stop a sale or lease of the sewers.

The group collected nearly 4,000 signatures on petitions to place Issue 9, which requires voter approval to sell or lease a city-owned utility, on the ballot.

Partly as a response to the SOS initiative, Plusquellic placed his scholarship plan — Issue 8 — on the November ballot as well.

Willie Smith, SOS president, said that Issue 9 "protects the citizens of Akron from hasty political decision making" and enables city voters to decide the fate of the sewers and other public utilities.

Smith said Issue 9 will give the mayor and City Council the time "to further study" the scholarship proposal.

"This thing needs to be well thought out," said Smith, who said the mayor's scholarship plan was "rushed." He then offered the services of SOS in helping the city formulate a scholarship plan that doesn't require the lease of a citizen-owned asset like the sewers.

Plusquellic has not been shy in questioning the motives of SOS. On more than one occasion, he has called SOS "a group of naysayers" with "no principles or morals" that wants to make the city look bad.

Mark Williamson, speaking on behalf of the mayor, said, "If they are against Issue 8, they are against scholarships."

The bottom line, Smith said, is that Issue 9 "restores democracy for Akron citizens."


Gordon opened a booklet and read a quote from Tom Johnson, the fabled Cleveland mayor who served in the early 1900s: "I believe in the municipal ownership of all public service monopolies . . . for if you do not own them, they will, in time, own you."

Closing the booklet, Gordon recalled an observation often made by her husband: "He always says — our sewers are doing exactly what they were meant to do."

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