

## Libertarians Pursue New Political Goal: State of Their Own

By Pam Belluck

Oct. 27, 2003

A few things stand out about this unprepossessing city. It just broke its own Guinness Book world record for the most lighted jack-o'-lanterns with 28,952. It claims to have the world's widest Main Street.

And recently, Keene became the home of Justin Somma, a 26-year-old freelance copywriter from Suffern, N.Y., and a foot soldier in an upstart political movement. That movement, the Free State Project, aims to make all of New Hampshire a laboratory for libertarian politics by recruiting libertarian-leaning people from across the country to move to New Hampshire and throw their collective weight around. Leaders of the project figure 20,000 people would do the trick, and so far 4,960 have pledged to make the move.

The idea is to concentrate enough fellow travelers in a single state to jump-start political change. Members, most of whom have met only over the Internet, chose New Hampshire over nine other states in a heated contest that lasted months.

(The other contenders were Alaska, Delaware, Idaho, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming. One frequently asked question on the project's Web site was "Can't you make a warmer state an option?")

Once here, they plan to field candidates in elections and become active in schools and community groups, doing all they can to sow the libertarian ideals of curbing taxes, minimizing regulation of guns and drugs, privatizing schools and reducing government programs.

"We want to make New Hampshire our home, and we want to make it a better place for everybody," said Elizabeth McKinstry, a project spokeswoman. "Many times government gets in the way."

One appeal of New Hampshire is the state's reputation for flinty individualism (although it has only about 400 dues-paying Libertarian Party members). The 150 Free Staters already living here lobbied hard for the state, and Gov. Craig Benson, a Republican, met with visiting members and told them to "come on up, we'd love to have you."

If the idea catches on, the movement may benefit from the unusually high political profile New Hampshire has because of its early presidential primary.

Some Free Staters plan to move when the project attracts 20,000 participants, which it hopes to do by 2006. But many intend to move sooner, and a few have already arrived.

"Having so many people move into a state means we can really raise issues," Mr. Somma said. "Once we start to elect people to the Statehouse, I think the low-hanging fruit will be issues like educational reform and medical marijuana."

Keene, a college town of 24,000, is not the only Free Stater destination in New Hampshire. Indeed, as many members acknowledge, one quandary for a movement of individualistic people is that it can be hard to get everyone on the same page.

Devera Morgan and her husband, Bruce, a computer consultant, plan to move soon from Royse City, Tex., possibly to far-north Coos County or the White Mountain town of North Conway. "I didn't think I would ever leave Texas; that's how much I believe in this project," said Ms. Morgan, 34, who wants to lift restrictions on home schooling and says she may run for office in New Hampshire.

Although Jackie Casey had voted for Wyoming, she just moved from Portland, Ore., to Merrimack, between Nashua and Manchester, renting a basement apartment with her cat, Soopa Doopa Hoopa, and her two 9-millimeter handguns. (She wants a machine gun "or at least a rifle" for Christmas.) She has already hung one wall and her bathroom with framed posters of Frank Zappa, who was a libertarian himself.

"I don't like to go places that don't let me have my gun," said Ms. Casey, 33, who sells memberships to a Las Vegas survivalist training institute and models for comic books (her likeness has graced the cover of one called Reload). Her New Hampshire plans include starting eight businesses "because nine out of every 10 fail, and I've already started two, so I need to do eight more."

"I want to be a billionaire in my lifetime," she added, "and I don't want to live among people who think that's bad."

One project member chose the tiny town of Freedom. Also planning to move to New Hampshire are two candidates for the 2004 presidential nomination of the Libertarian Party.

Some project members favor zeroing in on one county or town to maximize their influence, and are scouting out about 30 communities light on property taxes and strictures like building codes. "We completely support and respect that," Ms. McKinstry said. "We just would never dictate to people."

The Free State has its opponents here, and shoulder shruggers, too.

"If you've got people saying we just want to mind our own business, keep government out of our lives, hey, we all feel that way," said Kathy Sullivan, chairwoman of the state Democratic Party. "But if they want to have a radical change in our form of government, no, you're not welcome here."

Michael Blastos, Keene's Democratic mayor, said he was not concerned because Keene had too little housing to accommodate many newcomers, and "anything at all that would stimulate the voters and get them stirred up is a good thing."

Linda Fowler, a government professor at Dartmouth, called the project a "gimmick" and dismissed "the idea that 20,000 people are going to make a critical difference in New Hampshire, a state of a million and a half people with very high voter participation."

But, she said, "I suppose if they really did produce 20,000 people, then that might provide a margin in some legislative elections in some parts of the state."

That seems to be exactly what the project has in mind, according to an article by its founder, Jason Sorens, a political science lecturer at Yale.

"When we arrive in our state, we will have to do our best to blend in, lay down roots in the community, and slowly build our individual reputations," he wrote. "If we come in trumpeting an 'abolish-everything' platform, we will make enemies out of people who might otherwise be sympathetic to us. The key idea behind the F.S.P. is that for every activist, we will be able to generate several voters."

Dr. Sorens wrote that "within about 10 years after our move, we should have people in the state legislature and we should have entrenched political control of several towns and counties." He added that "once we have control of the county sheriffs' offices, we can order federal law enforcement agents out, or exercise strict supervision of their activities," and "once we have obtained some success in the state legislature, we can start working on the governor's race."

New Hampshire's constitution guarantees the "right of revolution" if "the ends of government are perverted and public liberty manifestly endangered."

But that is not their intention, Ms. McKinstry said, pointing to their mascot, a porcupine -- "a friendly little forest creature who doesn't harm anyone else, minds his own business, but is not really someone that you want to mess with or you might get stuck and a little ouchy."

Dr. Sorens, 26, said the project reflected his upbringing in Houston as the son of a single mother who pulled herself out of poverty with help from relatives and a Christian charity. He also drew on the migration of the Mormons, the journey of the Pilgrims and the movement of many liberal-minded people to Vermont in the 1970's.

Free Staters, many of them college graduates under 50 earning \$60,000 or more, were looking for a state that was small (fewer than 1.5 million people), with low campaign spending, so Free State candidates could compete.

New Hampshire's lack of income tax and sales tax, relatively healthy economy, liberal gun laws and proximity to Boston helped. A big plus was its legislature, the country's largest with 417 members and a state representative for roughly every 3,000 people.

"In New Hampshire, there's so many elected positions that anyone can become cemetery trustee or dog catcher," Ms. McKinstry said.

About 1,000 project members opted out of moving to New Hampshire, largely for geographic reasons, and Dr. Sorens said the project might eventually designate a second free state out west. Ultimately, he said, he hopes for regional chapters and a new political party with broader appeal than the Libertarian Party.

So far, Free Staters range along the libertarian spectrum, some more moderate than others.

Ms. Casey advocates eliminating entitlements because "then you'd only attract immigrants who are hard-working people." She said: "I radically oppose public education. It's demeaning and it creates criminals." And she says "the thing that hurts poor people is they don't know how to think of themselves as rich."

Mr. Somma doesn't argue against public schools, but maintains that they get too much money, which is good only "if you have to have nice school buildings and computers and all that." "Back in the day," he said, "they didn't need all that to teach kids. Back in the day, you were sitting around on rocks and listening to a guy talk."

Mr. Somma, who grew up in Brooklyn, confessed that he and his wife moved for lifestyle reasons, too, not just political ones. Otherwise, he said, "I could never pitch to my parents, my wife: Listen, here's this group of people going to move to another state, and I'm going with them."