

Sign of times: Ads growing on public school land

By Darlene White Natale

Mars Area School District hasn't changed the property-tax rate for the past two years, but its most recent attempt to stretch its dollars has met with mixed reaction.

The object of concern is an illuminated sign that sits in front of the high school on Route 228. Besides announcing school activities in electronic letters, it is decorated with ads for Pepsi Cola and Mars National Bank.

"I am not sure how I feel about the sponsorship — the school district endorsing certain products," said parent Lynne Giger. "But if it's the only way to get [the sign]."

John Coury, Mars Area High School principal, is unapologetic. "We've had 20 to 25 calls from other school districts, asking . . . how the sign came about," he said.

Pepsi and Mars National paid for the electronic message center; the school district's only expense is for electricity.

"I think we view it as being a good corporate citizen and helping our community," said Dallas Hipple, president of Mars National.

The new sign is a symbol of the many growing links between school districts and business.

Coury credits Mars Athletic Director Scott Heinauer with the sign deal. "He has saved the district, I would guess, \$50,000."

That includes the value of the new high-school sign and six scoreboards obtained earlier.

Heinauer originally worked out an arrangement under which Mars Area was given the scoreboards in exchange for making Pepsi the exclusive provider of soft drinks sold in school vending machines and at concession stands, Coury said.

Mars is by no means alone in striking such deals.

Cameron Coca-Cola won a yearlong battle with Pepsi for the right to peddle soft drinks at North Allegheny School District events and in school buildings. North Allegheny is the largest school district in the North Hills and southern Butler County. That 10-year deal signed in 1994 was estimated to be worth more than \$325,000 to the district, Superintendent Lawrence Bozzomo said.

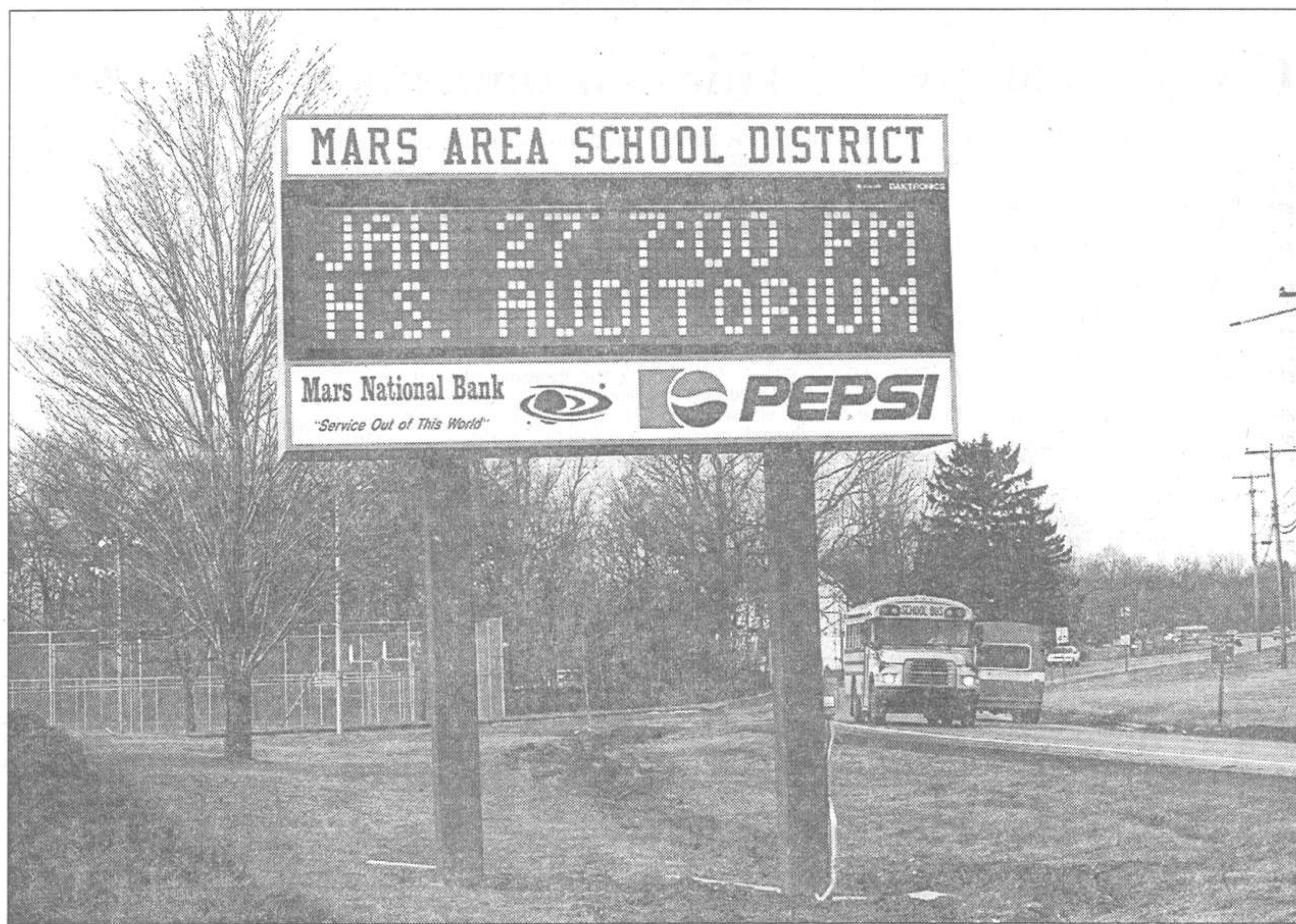
Earlier that year, nearby Shaler Area approved a similar 10-year contract with Pepsi-Cola Co. of McKees Rock.

"I think it's a nice sign, [and] it will be helpful," said Alan Romatowski. "But I'm a little uncomfortable with corporate America insinuating itself in our schools and even deciding what soft drink our kids can buy." He is the parent of two Mars Area students.

Romatowski expressed concern about additional commercializa-

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Robert J. Pavuchak/Post-Gazette

The new sign in front of Mars Area High School on Route 228.

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tion of Mars schools. Middle and high school students already see commercials on the "Channel One" morning news they watch daily.

K-III Communications Inc., possibly best known as owner of the Weekly Reader children's newspaper, provides the Channel One satellite programming. Each 12-minute broadcast features 10 minutes of news and two minutes of ads from sponsors.

Each school receives about \$25,000 in viewing equipment that includes a satellite dish, televisions, two VCRs and free maintenance, according to Claudia Peters, Channel One spokeswoman. Schools also receive commercial-free programming covering a variety of subjects worth another \$50,000, Peters said.

Coury called Channel One highly effective.

"A lot of teen-agers don't watch the news at night . . . With Channel One, the kids get to be aware of what's going on in the world."

Mars is one of 770 Pennsylvania schools that tune into the service each morning.

Channel One differs from regular network news by "adding depth and context to every piece we produce," Peters said.

On Jan. 10, for example, the first news story featured was a commuter plane crash in Michigan. The report included crash-site footage, a locator map and airplane graphics. It included an interview with a student reporter from a nearby high school.

The piece was followed by two commercials, one for Snickers and one for Winterfresh gum.

The next story presented that day was a feature on dyslexia, a learning disability in which a reader's brain scrambles letters. It included brain graphics, an explanation of brain function and an interview with a person who has dyslexia. The Dyslexia Society's phone number and web address both were given.

This piece was followed by a Princeton Review commercial selling SAT preparation courses, books and software and an anti-drug public-service announcement. The program wrapped up with a single-question pop quiz.

Students were eager to shout out their answers.

"I think it's cool," eighth-grader Ben Giovengo said of Channel One. "I watch it if I don't have homework to finish."

"I like the commercials," conceded Katie Carlino, another eighth-grader.

At Mars Area Middle School, Channel One news is followed by a student-produced newscast with school announcements and sports.

A local education expert says school administrators and boards must decide on a case-by-case basis if the benefits of such corporate offerings as scoreboards, television shows and science programs outweigh any disadvantages.

"The problem with some enterprises, like Channel One, is determining what is their primary motivation in establishing the partnership," said James Henderson, dean of the School of Education at Duquesne University. He is not a Channel One fan. "[Channel One] has a value, [but it is] not a sufficient value worth endorsing that rather blatant advertising," he said.

He pointed to a science program spearheaded by Pittsburgh-based Bayer Corp. and a dozen partners as a better example of a school-and-business relationship.

The Allegheny Schools Science Education and Technology, or ASSET, program directs its resources toward teaching science better, Henderson said.

"Bayer has not attached its logos [to the material]," he said. "You'd have to dig really hard to find the affiliation."

But in a time when districts find themselves squeezed by rising costs, rising community expectations and pressure to keep property taxes under control, school boards and businesses are likely to keep looking for new partnerships.

Mars Area Superintendent William Pettigrew told the school board in November that he had received an offer from an unnamed Pittsburgh company to bear most of the costs for constructing a new running track at the district stadium. In return, the company wants to construct 12-by-24-foot moving billboard. The advertising sign would carry three changing messages. Mars would get use of one of the sides and retain veto power over the content of the other two messages.

Pettigrew said this week that he had not responded to the offer.

But if the billboard were proposed as part of a formal bid to build the track, it would be considered, he said.

"The school board can consider anything," he said.

Henderson, however, said he was worried about what unspoken messages were being communicated by having such advertising signs on school property.

Darlene White Natale is a freelance writer.