

## Community and Lifestyles

# Breast reduction surgeries on the rise

by Sophie Kerszberg

More and more women suffer from debilitatingly large breasts, and more of them are finding relief in breast reduction surgery.

Nearly 106,000 breast reduction surgeries were performed in the United States in 2007, up 167 percent from almost 40,000 in 1992, according to data published by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. In fact, breast reduction has become the fifth most-performed reconstructive cosmetic surgery.

Dr. Joseph Desantis, a plastic surgeon who practices in State College and Danville, said breast surgeries—reductions, augmentations, uplifts and reconstructions—are what he performs most often.

Desantis said there's a high demand for breast reduction surgery in this region of Pennsylvania.

"I probably do three breast reductions for

every augmentation. I think that's been fairly consistent through my years of practice since 1994."

Margaret, 44, (who preferred that her real name not be used) lives and works as graphic designer in Centre County. She underwent breast reduction surgery in 2007 after years of suffering and deliberation. Margaret said she had been big-chested since the sixth grade, when the size of her breasts started making her physically and psychologically "uncomfortable, extremely uncomfortable." Her breasts continued to grow after she gave birth to and breastfed each of her two children.

"I wish I had it done a long time ago," she said, although she added that she was glad she waited until after she had children, as her breasts may have returned to their former size had she had the surgery prior to becoming a mother.

Before her surgery, Margaret's overlarge

breasts were affecting virtually every aspect of her life. She said she had difficulty breathing due to the weight on her chest, and she was unable to lie down on her back for more than a few minutes because of the weight. It was hard to walk, almost impossible to exercise and difficult to buy clothing.

"I made my tailor rich," she said.

Meanwhile, her bra straps dug painful grooves into her shoulders, and her neck was under constant strain from holding up the weight in her chest. "I was in physical therapy for my neck problems," she said, "but it didn't make any sense because my neck wasn't the real problem; my breasts were."

She tried dieting to ease the strain. Even after losing 50 pounds, however, Margaret said that her chest size remained the same.

In addition to her physical discomfort, Margaret felt very self-conscious.

"I would never get up in front of a group of people if I could help it, because I knew that everybody would be looking at and thinking about my chest," she said. After her breast reduction, though, Margaret said one woman told her, "I'm glad you got that done, because the first time I met you, I thought, 'That poor girl.'"

"The best outcome of the surgery, even more than alleviating some of my medical problems is that I feel way more comfortable in front of people," she said.

### Not just a cosmetic fix

The physical problems associated with large breasts are serious, Desantis said.

"There is a fairly consistent constellation of symptoms: back, neck and shoulder pain; grooving from the bra straps and irritation

see Surgery, pg. 7

# State High project: Back where we started?

by Suzan Erem

After six months of community meetings and more than \$270,000 spent on a consultant to manage them, the State College Area School Board is expected to face the same or higher price tag for a new high school than before voters ousted more than half of the board over the issue.

"It's déjà vu all over again," veteran school board member Gowen Roper said wryly to one reporter after hearing the options.

The results of those meetings and online surveys will lead to a steering committee recommendation to the school board this month. Whether the high school will be on the current site or a new site, one school or two or renovated or built new will be determined by the school board vote in March, explained School Board President Rick Madore.

"DeJong has said it will be updatable," Madore said of the district wide master plan to be adopted. "Maybe we'll make a few relatively minor adjustments."

But the devil is in the details, and the last time around, those details plus the four years between adopting the plan and implementing the high school portion of it added millions to the cost of the high school proj-

ect and tore the community apart.

As board members and the public await the steering committee's recommendations due in March, Madore wondered aloud about where in the long-term plan the high school would land this time. If it comes after several elementary school projects, this board could be in the same position the last one was in, except this time – due to passage of the 2006 state law called Act 1 which requires a referendum for increasing property taxes due to projects this size - it will likely have to pass a referendum to fund the project.

"Before we put a spade in the earth, before we borrow a dollar to start to do it, that's when we'll have to go to the community and say here's a lot more specific detail on what this high school project will look like," Madore said. "And given the additional information then, that's when we'll have the referendum."

At the Feb. 23 meeting, board members were already expressing concerns about reaching consensus on the high school portion of the plan. Some commented that it may require more meetings.

"To be honest with you, that's my biggest concern, that the community support will be there for one option," board member Lou Ann Evans said in an interview. "We will

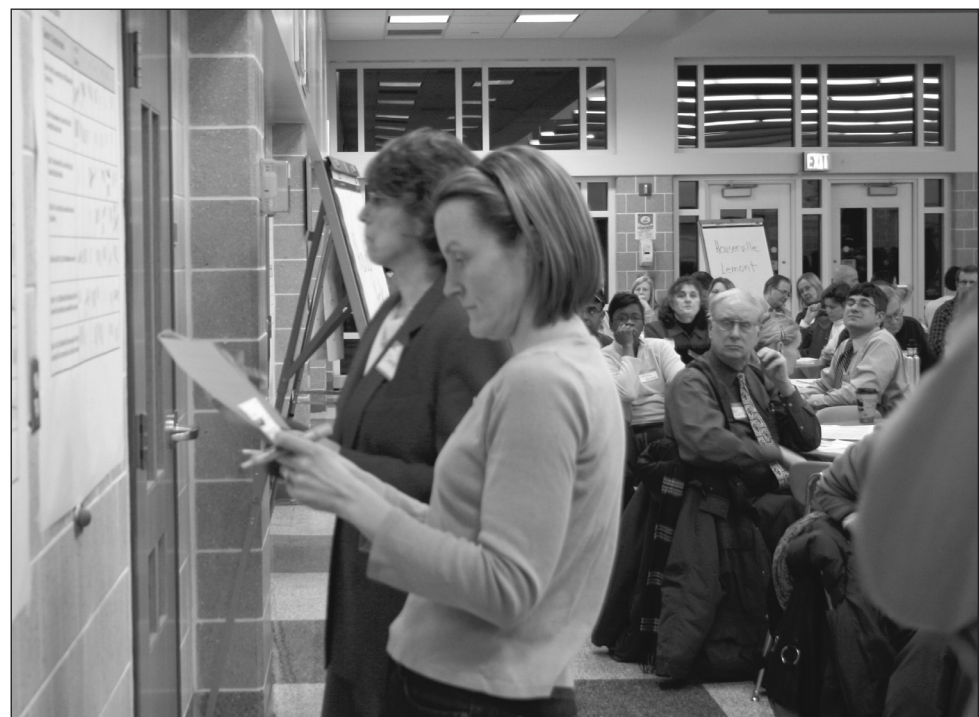


Photo by Wilda Stanfield

State College Area School District residents record the data from conversations at their tables as others look on during the February community dialogue. This was the last public input meeting before the steering committee recommends a long-term plan for elementary schools and the high school.

have to sell the referendum, and that is a very difficult task." Evans said she will not be running for office again in the upcoming school board elections.

In the community dialogue held in mid-

see State High, pg. 9

from Surgery, pg. 6

under the breasts either from skin on skin or the bra strap rubbing," he said. "That can progress to fungal infections and even open areas. The symptoms are not minor."

Research suggests that large breasts could contribute to long-term health problems as well. A 2008 study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* showed that, even when adjusting for overall body fat, larger breasts tend to mean a higher risk of diabetes.

And among women who are not overweight or obese, a D bra cup size indicated an increased risk of breast cancer when compared to similar women who wore an A cup size, according to the results of a 2005 Harvard study published in the *International Journal of Cancer*. Breast cancer patients with larger breasts are also more likely to suffer from a more advanced form of the cancer, according to another study reported in the journal *International Seminars in Surgical Oncology*.

Women with larger breasts are even at a greater risk for wound complications after heart surgery, according to a study published in *Archives of Surgery*. In an article

"I was afraid when I saw a video of how [the surgery] was done. That was a mistake, because it kept me from having the surgery for years."

--Margaret

entitled "The Health Burden of Breast Hypertrophy," Carolyn Kerrigan and other doctors described the outcome of a survey that compared the quality of life for women with overly large breasts with a control group of women with average-sized breasts.

For Margaret, breast reduction surgery took five hours.

"It's not a difficult surgery to go through," she said. Doctors removed 12 pounds of breast tissue and sewed her incisions with about 400 stitches. For nine days she had drains in her sides for the wound seepage resulting from the surgery. For the 10-week recovery period she reports she "couldn't do much" and had to sleep in a recliner to avoid pain.

Yet Margaret said that by far the hardest



Photo by Suzan Erem

Dr. Joseph Desantis says he performs three times as many breast reduction surgeries as breast augmentation surgeries in this region.

part of the surgery was deciding to go through with it.

"I was afraid when I saw a video of how it was done," she said. "That was a mistake, because it kept me from having the surgery for years." The two factors that gave her the courage to have the surgery, she said, were the supportive online community she found at [www.breastreduction4you.com](http://www.breastreduction4you.com) and a surgeon who was willing to talk to her about the procedure for more than an hour each time she visited his office.

"I brought a tablet full of questions with me to the doctor," she said. "Then I came back with another tablet full of questions."

Margaret's 15-year-old niece is currently going through the same physical and emotional distress Margaret did as a teenager, also due to her breast size, Margaret said. She said she would encourage her niece to

undergo a breast reduction after she loses some weight, after puberty and perhaps after she has had children.

### When is the right time?

Penn State sophomore and media studies major Niki (who also preferred we not use her real name) has a different perspective. Niki, who is now 20 years old, had a breast reduction at age 16, when she and her mother agreed that her size "F" breasts were "not worth the trouble," she said. Like Margaret, her chest began giving her problems in sixth grade. "My back hurt all the time," she said, "and I couldn't just go pick out a bathing suit at Target; I had to go to a specialty store to buy bras and bathing suits."

Exacerbating the situation was the fact that she was on her high school's swim team and had to spend a lot of time in swimsuits. Unlike Margaret, though, Niki said, "It was not a self-image issue. I liked my cleavage and I sometimes liked the attention. But it was just such a burden."

More than 6,300 teenage girls (and an alarming 16,400 teenage boys) had breast reduction surgery done in 2007, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, though doctors like Desantis encourage teens to wait if possible, for the same reasons Margaret believes her niece should wait.

Niki was glad not to wait, though. With four pounds of breast tissue removed, Niki said she now feels more proportional. A few of her friends joked that they wished she could give them her breasts if she didn't want them, and some boys at her school expressed shock that she would voluntarily reduce her breast size.

She was also warned by her doctor that she would have a two-thirds chance of not being able to breastfeed her children in the

see Surgery, pg. 8

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from Surgery, pg. 7

future.

"I'm okay with that," she said. "Boobs are overrated."

Both women's medical insurance covered the costs of the procedure, which Desantis said costs about \$6,000 in this region without insurance.

Desantis said he believes several factors contribute to the substantial number of breast reduction surgeries.

"It probably has more to do with genetics than anything else," he said of the popularity of the surgery in this region of the country. "I think breast hypertrophy has a big genetic component to it, [and] women are more aware of the surgery."

### Other possible causes

Another reason may be an increase in the number of women whose breast size gives them medical problems. For that, some researchers are blaming everything from weight gain to pesticides.

Breast size appears to be on the rise in other parts of the globe as well. According to a 2008 report in London's Daily Telegraph, British researchers found that

breast size has been enlarging from generation to generation in the United Kingdom. A decade ago, the average bra size was 34B; today, the average is a 36C, the report said. A popular retailer was cited as saying it sells twice the number of "D"-cup-sized bras than it did even three years ago. In the Netherlands, a 2006 study found that 32 percent of women wear a "D" cup, up from 20 percent just 5 years earlier.

Over the past two decades, obesity rates have risen to include about a quarter of Americans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Could breasts simply be expanding along with the rest of our bodies? Almost every study examining breast size acknowledges that obesity is one factor, but there may be others.

In the Yaqui Valley of Sonora, Mexico, a village literally split itself in two over the issue of pesticide use. The village that stayed in the valley uses modern agricultural practices and exposes its residents to pesticides, while the farmers that moved into the foothills do not use pesticides. When Elizabeth Guillette of the University of Florida and her colleagues examined the breast development of pubescent girls in each village, they found that the girls from

In addition to obesity and genetics as causes for the increase in breast size, xeno-estrogens in such products as plastics and pesticides are suspect.

valley village had larger developing breasts than those from the foothills. The researchers took into account the weight, height and genetic background of their subjects, and diet and lifestyle in the two villages are similar. The only variable they could point to was pesticide use.

Today's population is exposed to more xeno-estrogens than ever before, the Daily Telegraph report noted. Xeno-estrogens are compounds chemically similar to estrogen, the hormone responsible for stimulating breast growth. Found not only in pesticides but also in plastics and cosmetics, xeno-estrogens mimic the body's naturally occurring estrogen, and some scientists see them as one of the culprits behind oversized breasts.

Some activists point to artificial hormones in milk as another suspect. Some consumer groups and dairy farmers have raised the issue of rBST, a synthetic version

of bovine somatotropin or BST, a growth hormone present in small amounts in milk. rBST is injected into cows to increase milk production. Its use has become a contentious practice as consumers worry about its potential health effects on humans who consume cow milk and meat. If the hormone affects bovine mammary glands, what might it do to humans? To date, the rBST factor doesn't appear to be that significant. A 2008 National Institutes of Health statement asserts not only that digestion kills BST, but that human hormone receptors are unable to bind to it.

According to the same NIH report, however, injection of rBST into cows increases the presence of another growth hormone known as IGF-I, whose effects are undetermined. NIH scientists called for further investigation into the long-term effects of BST and into how IGF-I might impact human health and development.



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## from State High, pg. 6

February, an estimated 350 people, including the 45 members of the steering committee, listened to consultant William DeJong spell out seven options for a new high school and various options for elementary schools. All but one of the high school options were priced over \$100 million and as high as \$129 million. DeJong said recently skyrocketing construction costs as well as the current recession make accurate costs difficult to project.

The previous final (and only) bid on the project was \$117 million, up from \$80 million before a year-long debate between the old school board and a group called State High Vision began in 2005, and up from the original soft estimate of \$47 million in the long-term district-wide facilities plan from 2000. That bid was voted down unanimously.

But at the meeting Feb. 13, the question was not, "Can we afford it?" but, "Which do you prefer?" Residents, some first-timers and some familiar faces, discussed, debated and questioned the options in small groups, jotting down responses and later recording those on flipchart paper on the wall.

"We're not supporting any option that doesn't meet ed specs!" said one woman adamantly.

"I'm not exactly sure what ed specs are and how important they are," one man at another table said. That sentiment was echoed at a number of tables.

Madore admitted later that it became evident the education specifications portion of the research had not been conveyed effectively to the public. But the mood was convivial while steering committee members facilitated the small groups and administrators, board members, DeJong and reporters roamed the room listening to the hubbub.

In 2000, the long-term facilities planning process included extensive review of the

options by a Citizens Advisory Committee appointed by the board and the architectural firm hired to assist the district. The firm included interior designers, mechanical and electrical engineers and site designers who met with approximately 50 district staff, administrators, maintenance workers, teachers and department heads, according to district records.

The CAC then held two community dialogues that drew an estimated 150 people to each. CAC members attended a two-day workshop and a series of evening meetings related to the plans before presenting their recommendation to the school board. The district did not at the time have the technology to develop Web-based surveys that DeJong is using this time.

That recommendation, coming a number of years after the long-term plan had been established, and costing tens of millions of dollars over the original figure, created a stir that turned into an uproar that eventually unseated five school board members in the last election.

By the time the high school debate was over and the board reconstituted, the district had spent \$5.1 million on architecture and engineering, building and site construction fees, on a project that was almost ready to start, according to district spokesperson Julie Miller.

New school board members and their supporters promised transparency, so while CAC meetings are not required to be open to the public, the new board opened them. Then it spent \$276,000 to hire DeJong, no stranger to the district (his firm assisted State College in its elementary school construction decisions in the late 1990s) to facilitate the process. DeJong set up a series of five community meetings in September, then "community dialogues" in October and November. The firm estimates a total of 220 people attended the September meetings 160 came to the second and 125 to the third, though district staff said there is over-

lap in those figures because steering committee, board members, staff and possibly some community members attended multiple meetings.

Community meetings, committee recommendations, professional consultants, staff interviews ... If this entire process looks like a do-over, that's because it is.

"There's a misconception that the process was not the same last time," said district spokeswoman Julie Miller. "The processes were almost identical in terms of the master planning process." Miller said one difference is her position, one person dedicated to public relations, a job that wasn't filled until just before the last school board election.

Another difference was the feedback. The district has spent almost \$4,600 to advertise the meetings.

"As far as people taking the opportunity to provide input, I would say that is not something that happened," she said.

Feedback is also considerably easier now because of technology. A Web survey available after the two dialogs netted approximately 1,300 responses. DeJong encouraged attendees at the February meeting not to go to the Web the next day to do the survey. Of the 900-plus Web surveys they had received from the last dialog, only eight

came from the same computers, DeJong said. The results of the final survey were not available at press time.

The last run at the high school issue had been grandfathered in before Act I passed and would not have required a referendum, but this time, under a complicated formula, board members say it is highly likely a referendum will be required.

Madore wouldn't commit to when he expected to have to face a referendum on the high school. It depends, he said, on the priorities laid out by the steering committee recommendation. Still, the possibility of the community voting to go into debt for \$100 million-plus seems daunting when the very people who fought the last high school project, often citing the \$100 million figure, will now be the very ones recommending it. Madore said the board will have a lot of work to do with the community before it comes to that point.

"I don't think you should ever ask a girl to marry you unless you already know what the answer is going to be," said Madore. "If you do anything other than that, you're taking a huge chance. Before I put a referendum out for the public to vote on, I want to be as darned sure that that referendum is going to be accepted by the public."

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# Couple brings ballroom dancing to neophytes

by Maggie O'Keefe

On a chilly Tuesday night in February at the Panorama Elementary School in State College, the hot sounds of upbeat Latin music echoed in the gymnasium. Cutting through the infectious beats was the voice of Carter Ackerman, giving instructions on how to dance the cha cha.

"Now we will go over the chase," Carter said, his voice amplified by a headset microphone. "The chase is nothing more than a forward and back." Then Carter and his wife Ruby showed the dancers how to do the step.

The Ackermans teach an introductory course in ballroom dance, sponsored by State College Parks and Recreation, to almost 60 couples a week. The couple teaches such classics as the waltz, the cha cha, the foxtrot, the rumba, the tango and swing dancing.

"It is a nice diversion and really good for us because I have a very busy schedule with classes and homework," said Dave Cramer, a 25-year-old law student at Penn State University.

"Yeah, it's a cheap night out!" said his wife, Ashley Cramer, 24.

The Ackermans dance all week long, teaching square dancing on Mondays and introductory ballroom dance on Tuesdays, participating in a square dancing club on Wednesdays and teaching an advanced round dance class on Thursdays; Friday and Saturday nights are spent dancing or enjoying community activities.

"We don't usually go to bed until 2 a.m. most nights," Carter said over the ritual after-Tuesday-class dinner at Home Delivery Pizza Pub.

"Can you imagine these two old folks dancing seven days a week?" said a friend and dancing student, laughing at the idea of

such a schedule.

In truth, Carter and Ruby look like they could dance every night of the week. Both 70-year-olds are fit and graceful, and they dance with a youthful energy.

Carter's passion for dancing started in 1950. When he was 12 years old, he spent a summer at his uncle's farm in Minnesota. He decided to attend a square dance held each week in town but after seeing the dancing, he realized he didn't know the steps. He then read about square dancing in books and went back the next week, prepared to dance along.

Carter kept dancing, and when he met Ruby, a high school classmate, in 1958, he found his life-long dance partner.

Two years later, the Ackermans moved to State College and joined the State College Parks and Recreation ballroom dance class. During their third year of participating in the class, the dance caller quit; Carter picked up the microphone with the intention of substituting until they hired another caller.

He's been substituting for 46 years.

Carter and Ruby have made teaching and taking dance classes a major part of their lives. They take yearly dance classes from dancing institutes to keep up with the modern styles, and they teach for a simple reason.

"We started teaching because people wanted to learn," Ruby said.

Several couples who take the ballroom dancing course agreed that it was a "cheap date" that brought them to the class each week. At \$2.50 per person or \$5 per couple, with no week-to-week commitment to attend, the cost of the course is an entertainment bargain.

Couples also come for the sheer joy of dancing.

"It's the highlight of the week for us," said one woman spoke to Ruby during a break.



Photo by Suzan Erem

Carter and Ruby Ackerman illustrate the "New Yorker" in the Panorama Elementary School gymnasium where they teach ballroom dance Tuesday nights.

The skill level varies from couple to couple. Some couples follow Carter and Ruby step for step, while other couples dance to their own beat, enjoying the music and each other's company.

"It's something to do together; make that

your headline," said a friend at the post-class dinner, a request that provoked applause from the entire table of dancers.

Carter and Ruby Ackerman offer their weekly dance classes, which they call "the perfect exercise," through June.

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