

"We the People"

Though my roots are in the heartland of Nebraska I have been fortunate enough to live in the four corners of our great nation. I have seen many changes take place in many varied neighborhoods and learned that those changes were controlled by the participation or non-participation of the people who lived in those neighborhoods.

I grew up with the sprawl of Orange County, CA when the developers mowed down the citrus orchards and planted vast tracts of houses. I was in Tacoma, WA when the upscale Lakewood was born and local citizens made the pulp mills clean up the mill's effluence. I San Francisco I was part of the revitalization of Bernal Heights. In New York I witnessed the gentrification of the Atlantic Avenue and Cobble Hill neighborhoods.

Now I am retired in Sarasota where the battle between big developers and local homeowners continues. Here the outcome of our neighborhood depends on the participation or non-participation of us, the local homeowners. If we want to control the future of our locale we can, but only if we participate presently.

We have two main participatory tools: organization and attitude. Almost all of our neighborhoods have associations and now many of these associations are banding together to form the Fruitville 210 Community Alliance and joining the Sarasota Council of Neighborhood Associations. These associations are run by an active 3-5% of the member residents. Meetings are attended by 5-10% of the member residents. The rest of the people say they care but also say they are too busy to participate. Well, the 3-5% who take the time to do the work make the time; they have jobs and families, too. For example, the president of Southpointe Meadows has three jobs, two children and five grandchildren.

Organization gives us the power of numbers. It is those numbers that our county commissioners listen to. We may not have the money the developers have but in organization we have the votes and it is those votes that elect and re-elect the commissioners. And they know it! We need more participation by our neighbors to give us a greater voice, more votes, in our county government. It needn't be a very active participation, perhaps only an hour or two per month. If folks would just participate enough to go to a monthly meeting, be aware of what is going on, to vote and perhaps send an occasional email, that would make a tremendous difference. I try to bring a new neighbor to every meeting and after that they talk to neighbors.

Our second most powerful tool is attitude, a positive attitude. Positive is a pro, it gets things done; negative is a no, it stops things from getting done. Developers always show the positive face of progress to our commissioners; they are pleasing people to work with. If, on the other hand, we only complain to our commissioners we alienate them. They know whiners are "do notters" and seldom take the time to vote. But, if we are positive and offer solutions, they know we will take the time to vote. They are elected to do the will of the people and if they don't they will not be re-elected. And they know it!!

We know the needs of our neighborhoods. The county planners, commissioners and engineers know the needs of our entire country and how to fill them. Our job is to get them to focus on our neighborhood and direct the assets toward us. These people are educated, trained and experienced in doing their jobs. If we complain that they don't know what they are doing do you think they will want to work with us and fill our needs first? Or, might we be more successful if we, with a positive and pleasing attitude, present our problems and offer solution?

We can control the future of our neighborhoods if we want to, but only if each of us will but spend a little time in positive participation. If you have never been to a county commissioner's meeting I encourage you to go. There you will learn that ours is truly "a government of the people, by the people, for the people..." And we are the people that must make that happen.

Harmon Heed
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