

GRASSROOTS TIPS ON NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATION: DEFEATING THE FORMATION OF PROPERTY OWNERS' / HOMEOWNERS' ASSOCIATIONS

Martha Crockett

Background: From the fall of 1999 through May of 2000, the Board of our Civic Club put forth a strong effort to pass a new set of Deed Restrictions (restrictions which included a Property Owners' Association, POA) for the 741 homes encompassed by our subdivision. Willowbend Civic Club was formed in the late 1950's as a voluntary participation neighborhood organization. Although the new set of Deed Restrictions did not specifically mention the formation of a POA, provisions for all of the POA components were present: Mandatory assessments (in lieu of voluntary dues), an Architectural Control Committee, and sweeping powers (not enumerated in the document but provided for in Chapter 204 of the Texas Property Code) granted to the controlling Board of Directors.

When several homeowners realized what the new Deed Restrictions entailed, ***Willowbend Neighbors United*** was formed to defeat the passage of the amended restrictions. During the seven months of confrontation, the Board of Willowbend Civic Club repeatedly changed the "ground rules" - first citing Chapter 204 as the enabling legislation, then Chapter 201, and finally the current Willowbend Subdivision Deed Restrictions - restrictions which only required a simple majority to change.

It was a roller coaster ride! The issue was finally resolved (at least temporarily) on May 31, 2000, by the election of new officers and a new Board of Directors for the Willowbend Civic Club. The new officers and Board members campaigned on an anti-POA platform. The 350 residents attending the election meeting elected these new officers and Board members by a 4-1 margin.

GETTING STARTED

- **Form a "core" group.** This can be as small as 3 or 4 people.
- **Name your organization.** When you are sure of your facts, immediately write a press release announcing your organization and why it has been formed. Send the press release to your local newspaper. The paper may not print it, but the press release is wonderful door-to-door information for your target audience - the homeowners in your subdivision.
- **Hold regular meetings.** This cannot be stressed too strongly. ***WNU*** started with 4 people, expanded to a dozen, and then to 30-50 per meeting. We met every Sunday afternoon, rain or shine. We started meeting in a member's home and then had to move to a local church for more space. This meeting time is invaluable for catching up, planning strategy, and networking. These meetings keep the momentum going!
- **Obtain legal counsel.** This can be pro-bono - or you may well have to pay for it.
- **Be prepared to raise money.** Unless you have someone with deep pockets to finance your efforts, ask everyone to contribute what they can - frequently. Don't be shy! Bills have to be paid. ***WNU*** raised money throughout the entire 7 month period. Open a checking account. A checking account shows that you are serious, and more importantly, provides an accurate record of your contributions and expenditures.
- **Know your opponents.** Do your homework. Is there an existing Civic Club/Association in place? Does it have By-Laws and/or a Constitution? Know these documents as well as you know your name! Find out who the primary POA instigators are. What is their motive? Opposition research is vital.

- **Be prepared to PRINT, PRINT, PRINT.** If your neighbors only have the opposition's viewpoint, the fight is over. What you print should be **SIMPLE, factual, and timely.** Organize your volunteers so that you can "turn around on a dime" - getting rebuttals to the opposition's message, new information, notices of meetings, etc. to residents immediately. **WNU** volunteers took printed information door-to-door during the entire 7 months. Use door hanger bags! Paper stuck in doors and under doormats is just so much trash! Each piece of printed information should have several (at least 4) names and telephone numbers of individuals who can be called to answer questions.

Designate one, or possibly two, individuals in your group to write your material. Do not make this a group or committee exercise. If you do, you'll still be working on your first piece when the fight is over!

- **As your strategy and message are refined, block walking is an effective tool in communication. Neighbors talking to neighbors cannot be overemphasized. Consider hosting block parties and printing yard signs with a simple message.**
- **Last, but certainly not least, establish a Telephone Committee - with accurate lists!** Most communities have residents who want to help but who cannot take an active physical role - walking blocks, attending meetings, etc. These folks are usually delighted to help by phoning. They can remind members of meetings, get out "alerts", and help raise funds!

Remember: Levels of commitment and available time vary. But everyone who cares about the issue has *something* to offer. Find out early on exactly what individual volunteers are willing to do. Then, as your organization expands, there will be "old hands" with established jobs to work with new volunteers.

Every community is different. What works well in one neighborhood may not work well in another. Keep your eye on the goal -- **NO POA!** Let's hope that as homeowners become more aware of POA dangers, our task will become easier. To paraphrase, "The Neighborhood You Save Will Be Your Own!"