



LOVING THY NEIGHBORHOOD

FROM GRASSROOT DEFENDERS TO SAVVY POLITICAL PLAYERS,
NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVISM IS FLOURISHING IN SARASOTA

THEY WALK FROM DOOR TO DOOR AT DUSK WITHOUT ANYTHING TO SELL BUT AN IDEA. They plant trees and pick up litter. They strategize in living rooms and on front porches. They read zoning codes, commission agendas and weighty consultants' studies. They handprint signs and wave them at heated public hearings. They organize crime watches and dumpster days. And they make a point to know their elected commissioners and city or county staff managers by first name.

Whether each operates more as a noisy one-man-band or as part of a polished, professional ensemble, Sarasota's neighborhood advocates have turned up the volume over the years, as they have grown more savvy to the political processes. Where before they might have shown up to protest a county decision or development already in the final stages of approval, they have now learned to embed themselves in the planning process, and the earlier the better. This requires longer hours and better organization on the part of neighborhood associations, and a willingness to open doors to participation on the part of local government. As a result, a funny thing happened on the way to

last big developer-neighborhood showdown: the two sides forgot to mind the Sarasota tradition of polarization over growth, public verbal assaults, standoff and indecision, and decided to revitalize a community in an image they could all live with instead.

The community is Osprey and the developer, Henry Rodriguez, is credited with creating a new model of inclusion and cooperation with neighborhoods. Rodriguez successfully won overwhelming community approval for a \$200 million, new urbanist village, an infill project with 1.3 million square feet of residential and commercial space, including a Walmart superstore. He did it the old-fashioned way, through dozens of private neighborhood meetings, hundreds of phone calls and months of negotiation with Walmart. "We changed plans 18 times," says Rodriguez. "We worked very hard with the community." In May, he turned his attention to development of a different sort: Rodriguez and top neighborhood and building industry veterans received county approval to pilot Square One, a restructured developer-neighborhood workshop of their own design that should be "less expensive for the developer and less painful for the neighborhoods," says Giovanna Deveny of South Venice 2010.

"The days of the developer flying under the radar screen and nobody knowing about it are basically over," says Rodriguez, "A lot of developers prefer to avoid confrontation, but it's just a deferral of confrontation."

"Developers don't have to come to the neighborhood before they do anything, but it's a good idea to build that trust factor," says Joe Moraca, president of Sarasota's City Council of Neighborhood Associations (CCNA). "Some come in and say 'this is what we're going to do and we don't care what you say.' If someone comes in and says 'screw you, we're doing what we want,' it's easier to fight against that," Moraca says.

Sarasota City Commissioner LouAnn Palmer agrees. "The development community is now realizing that before they do anything they should connect with the community," says Palmer. "It's a lot easier for us at the other side of the table to make decisions when there aren't people fighting in front of us."

Ask government leaders name few standout neighborhood activists, and they will mention by name not a handful, but dozens of people who have risen to leadership to raise a protest or to lobby for improvements. Some took the time to master the dry details of commercial street lighting or stormwater management, so they could argue effectively on behalf of their communities. Others are valued for their ability to bridge differences among homeowners and commercial interests.

While they take apply their expertise in their own neighborhoods, they also talk to each other. The City Council of Neighborhood Associations meets the first Saturday morning of each month at Waldemere Fire Station, gathering like the knights of the round table to report on the battles they have won, and the battles for which they are preparing. They pose strategy questions, such as "how do I find out about a city sidewalk project before the trucks appear and start taking out shade trees on my street?" They find support as well as answers about how to access the public information that, while readily available, is not common knowledge.

"Having the information before it's too late is a real powerful tool for people to have," says Joe Moraca.

The volume of their behind-the-scenes communication with local government is formidable: neighborhoods have not only spoken out during the update of the county's comprehensive plan and creation of Sarasota's downtown master plan, but they also frequently invite public safety, planning or engineering staff to address neighborhood issues at their regular meetings. In May, County Planning

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BEST SARASOTA NEIGHBORHOOD BLOGS: joemoraca.org and saveoursarasota.blogspot.com

Director Anne McClung visited the county's Council of Neighborhood Associations to present the Fruitville Initiative, a county project to acquire and rezone land at Fruitville east I-75 to make it possible to build a green, mixed-use development there. Neighborhood reps also jotted down dates and times of public hearings over a proposed go-cart business east of I-75 (which they oppose) and the county's comprehensive plan update. City and county commissioners often show up at neighborhood meetings, as do candidates for local office.

"When I started campaigning I very quickly made acquaintance with the neighborhoods. You find out when you're running what's relevant. If you don't have the support of neighborhoods, you're not going to get elected," says County Commissioner Nora Patterson, also former Sarasota City Commissioner.

County Commissioner Shannon Staub agrees "anybody running for an elected seat in the county probably needs to court neighborhood groups."

Commissioners say a neighborhood representative who does his homework and comes prepared can be a pleasure to work with, a valuable wealth of information, even a sounding board. They take a different view of those who don't put in the time to become informed. A pet peeve, says Patterson, is "when people are demanding that we do something but they haven't taken the time to look at all the pieces of the puzzle we're dealing with. We love involvement, but you need to learn what you're talking about."

"If you're involved early on and talk to all sides, and present credible arguments, you have a pretty good chance of being heard," says Dick Clapp, president of the Indian Beach/Sapphire Shores Neighborhood Association. "Our neighborhood has always been vocal. If you do your homework and you speak up, the commissioners will listen to you."

Without a doubt, successful neighborhood activists don't win the ear of elected officials unless they are able to take a broader, if somewhat humbling, view that their personal agendas may not be legal or fundable or serve the greater good. On the other hand, when the loosely organized neighborhoods of Nokomis banded together in the mid-1990s to lobby for a community center and fight plans to locate the

county jail there, they succeeded, and found their voice in the process. Having survived that civic boot camp, they were prepared to initiate with the county the Nokomis Revitalization Plan, one of the first in the county linked to capital improvements funding. It is in the overlooked or neglected areas of the county that strong neighborhood associations can make the most difference: those who learn how to work the time-consuming planning processes can reap a harvest of public investment down the line.

"What you really have to do is have a neighborhood vision," says Joe Moraca, echoing the sentiments of other neighborhood leaders who can come up for air long enough to think about it. If battles over incompatibility force a neighborhood to reactively define what it is not, the newer neighborhood visioning process is its proactive counterpart, helping neighborhoods to define what they are.

Visioning also leads neighborhoods to look beyond their borders. In the southernmost part of the county, three neighborhood associations within Forked Creek Basin originally organized 1997 to protest a \$200 annual increase in their county stormwater management assessments. "We started out as individual neighborhood associations. Then we became a community alliance of associations. Now we're looking at becoming a regional presence within the Lemon Bay watershed," says Tom Minnich, president of the Southwest County Alliance of Homeowners' Associations. "There's lots of potential for regional thinking. I think that needs to be done throughout the state of Florida."

What begins with short-term involvement to face an immediate need, like traffic calming in Sarasota Springs or the defeat of the proposed jet ski business on quiet Lido Beach, inspires some neighborhood advocates into broader activism. "I like to think of it as a point of entry into public service," says Sarasota Neighborhood Partnership Director Michael Raposa, noting that at least three current city commissioners—Ken Shelin, Mayor Mary Anne Servian and Danny Bilyeu—were strong neighborhood champions first. That budding, grass-roots, neighborhood activist down the street may just be cutting his or her political teeth for higher service, and be smiling from the other side of the dias at your neighbors someday. **SRQ**

BANDING TOGETHER: SARASOTA'S UMBRELLA NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS

Sarasota's individual homeowner's associations have learned that while one neighborhood protest can create a ripple, a few dozen can band together to produce a formidable wave, especially in those looming battles over land use. The following are some of Sarasota's largest neighborhood organizations today.

Name	Nokomis Area Civic Association (NACA) www.floridahometeam.org scroll down to NACA	South Venice 2010 egroup address is pirdev@aol.com	Southwest County Alliance of HOAs egroup address is TMinnich@aol.com	Sarasota Council of Neighborhood Associations (CCNA), email at conasarasota@comcast.net	Siesta Key Association (SKA) website: www.siestakeyassociation.com	Coalition of City Neighborhood Associations (CCNA) website: www.sarasotaccna.org
Membership	38 HOAs 7,000 residences	20 HOAs 20,000 residences	25 HOAs 5,000 residences	60 HOAs 35,000 residences	1700 residences	27 HOAs
Year Founded	1995	1994	1997	1961	1948	1990
Players	President John Ask, Don Lewis as government liaison	Chair and founder Giovanna Deveny	President and founder Tom Minnich	Co-presidents Judy Johnson and Ann Kaplan, historic leader Bill Zoller	President Ann Kaplan, Lourdes Ramirez	President Joe Moraca, founders Mollie Cardamone, Linda Holland
Claim to Fame	Kept new county jail out of Nokomis; convinced county to build \$750,000 Nokomis Community Center on Nippono Road	To protest additional commercial development at Jacaranda/U.S. 41, chartered a bus to county commission meeting	Became stormwater management experts when three associations within the forked creek basin joined to protest an expensive project they felt cost taxpayers and benefited Taylor Ranch	In a recent newsletter, made a call for new county leadership if commissioners and administrator do not impose more controls on growth. Ouch	In 1954, lobbied Florida Legislature to pass an enabling act making SKA responsible for zoning on Siesta Key—a responsibility which, eventually, passed to the county commission.	Lobbied for creation of Sarasota's neighborhood partnership office and more neighborhood input in downtown planning
Working On	Nokomis Revitalization plan; water lines, U.S. 41 widening and commercial gateway	"A 21st century association" communicates widely through emails, acts as a resource/advisor to individual associations and sometimes, elected officials	Lemon Bay watershed water quality, upgrading State Road 776, infrastructure for 25,000 new homes in south county.	Growth-related quality of life issues impacting neighborhoods like rezonings, water and traffic	Zoning, compatibility, density on the key	CCNA has a host of 2005 issues, including the development process, transportation, code compliance, vagrancy

BUILDING A COMMUNITY FROM WITHIN

*Professor John McKnight Relays
How Blighted Neighborhoods
Can Discover Their Strengths*

While some neighborhoods have been humming along successfully for years, with a well-established associations and fine-tuned political skills, others are in dire straits, with crime, poverty or unemployment so oppressive that it can overwhelm efforts to come together and organize. Northwestern University Professor John McKnight has dedicated years to delivering a message to those neighborhoods and the individuals who want to help them. Even the most distressed community possesses the assets—individual talents, associations and institutions—to foment change from within.


"It's not so much a new idea as a documentation of the reality that every neighborhood is half full as well as half-empty, says McKnight, who is also co-director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University.

McKnight has studied hundreds of communities, from inner city neighborhoods to "dying" small towns. This past spring he relayed some of the success stories he had gathered to an enthusiastic crowd at Sarasota's neighborhood summit. It begins at the outset, says McKnight, when instead of creating a list of deficiencies and needs, a community takes inventory of what resources it already possesses. Churches, businesses, public assets like schools or parks, and even populations considered dependent—youth, the frail elderly and the disabled, can all be called upon to make a contribution.

"Twenty to thirty years ago when people were talking about neighborhood renewal, the whole idea was these neighborhoods are problems filled with needs and deficits and we've got to fix them," says McKnight. "We need in these needy neighborhoods to do a needs study."

The internal capacity of a community must be developed before any outside resources can be leveraged, says McKnight, who argues that when government or non-profits take over a community's problem-solving, rather than serving, they engender powerlessness.

"Often what's looked at as the core of the community is the not-for-profits. We're saying it's not. It's the churches, the block clubs, the baseball leagues, the men's organizations and the women's organizations. The primary development asset locally is the associations, not the paid people," says McKnight. "Each association already has a constituency that is mobilized."

McKnight offers summer training seminars in asset-based community development, and neighborhood advocates from Sarasota are expected to attend this July. Some scholarship funds may be available. To learn more about the summer seminar, call the City of Sarasota Neighborhood Partnership Office at 954-2612. 

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