

Extra effort could make councils work

By William Steward

I first got involved with community problems in January 1960 in Pacoima, a place I later adopted as my home. What got me involved was a stopped-up toilet which, in checking, I discovered was connected to a septic tank that was not hooked up to a sewer system.

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This led me to find out how city government worked and what you had to do as a citizen to get a problem like this resolved.

I ended up getting a whole neighborhood to sign a petition for not only sewers, but for sidewalks and streetlights for the area from Pacoima Wash to Paxton Street and from Laurel Canyon to San Fernando Road.

Over the next 10-12 years, I was involved with many organizations in Pacoima — Coordinating Council, Chamber of Commerce, Optimist Clubs, on board of several agencies and organizations. I started the first community parade in Pacoima, and was involved with organizing the Citizen Committee for Community Involvement, Area 5 (block captains on each block, organizing.)

I was able to get a "tot lot" built with volunteer work from residents and equipment donated from businesses in the area (King Kennedy Memorial Tot Lot Park). I assisted with community involvement to get several other parks with swimming pools developed.

I could go on, but I think what I've told you so far lets you know I do know a little bit about city government.

In the secession situation, those who argue we should secede are saying we are not getting services back for the amount of taxes we are paying. Soon as the people voiced this concern, we started getting all kinds of services done in the Valley — trees planted, sidewalks fixed, you name it.

The city must have the money. People have to speak up and demand or threaten, and then they will get the services they need.

People need to recognize how strong they really are.

Politicians are moved by two things: money and votes. Money is the lobbyist who works for big business. They give the money so politicians can pay for their propaganda to make us vote for them. The key word is vote.

Who votes? We the people, which means we hold the best hand to get what we want when we want it.

Just recently we were given the tools to be able to do this: neighborhood councils. However, they didn't tell us the right way to organize it, instead they gave a few people control to take charge in our communities and organize the councils so that the power structure still has the control.

We the citizens still don't have the power. I know this because I sat in on several meetings when Pacoima was organizing its neighborhood council.

We have an organization called Pacoima Beautiful, which was in the process of organizing the neighborhood into the block captain concept like we had when we had the Citizen Committee for Community Improvement. The difference only being that Pacoima Beautiful was established to report on community conditions: trash, abandoned cars, etc.

I suggested we could use this concept to develop the neighborhood council. You could have a block captain for each block. (It's easy to find one person on a block who is interested enough to try to organize a block. You will never get everyone on the block to participate, but the majority will.) So many blocks would become a section, and you would have a section leader for that. This would create an input channel for the neighborhood council.

What keeps politicians in office? Voters. Who can get politicians out of office? Voters. Who will politicians listen to? Voters. Who will have access to reach all of the people? Neighborhood councils. This could not only work on city issues, but county, state and federal issues. The vehicle is there. Use it.

Those whom the city chose to develop the neighborhood council in Pacoima ignored my suggestion. You see politicians pick up people who are working in agencies and organizations who have to follow the will of the people who pay their salaries and those people listen to who pays their salary and before you know it, it's back in control of the politicians.

That's why we need community people who are only controlled by other community people in those key positions on the neighborhood councils. Those people can learn how the government works and operates with help. Then and only then will the community have control.

William Steward is the past president of Pacoima Chamber of Commerce.