

Creativity, Commitment & Organization Can Sway Public Policy

By Bob Barrett,

I've used this column on several occasions as a bully pulpit to nudge Peoria residents toward civic engagement. Our system of representative government depends upon constituencies making their feelings known to the elected officials who act on their behalf.

This month I'd like to highlight what can be accomplished when residents organize themselves, marshal their arguments and make their cases before the City Council.

Fresh Air, Peace and Quiet

Last month, the city held a public meeting at Sunrise Mountain Library to present its design for a new truck route along the Agua Fria River. Upon completion late next year, this 1.7 mile, two-lane road between the intersections of Rose Garden Lane/112th Avenue and Pinnacle Peak Road/107th Avenue will enable gravel trucks to access the sand-and-gravel companies in the Agua Fria riverbed without using Beardsley Road.

Ventana Lakes residents have complained for years about gravel trucks bringing noise, fumes and particulates into their neighborhood. Eventually, they organized and took action. As *The Arizona Republic* reported:

"The residents took their concerns to council meetings. They illustrated their plight by hundreds showing up wearing face masks and those residents needing oxygen tanks making a video that showed the area before and after truck activity."

They persuaded the City Council to make reducing the truck traffic on Beardsley Road a priority. And they didn't stop there.

Once they had the City Council on board, the Ventana Lakes group rallied Peoria voters to support a 2008 bond initiative that included money to pay for the proposed truck bypass.

As a result of all those efforts, these citizens now are looking at a solution to their problem. They started out asking "if" something could be done. Last month found them studying the "wheres" and "whens" of the alternative truck route.

Work With the Terrain, Not Against It

Three years ago, APS announced its desire to erect a high-voltage transmission line across northern Peoria along the so-called Carefree Highway alignment. There is no actual road in the area, which Peoria's General Plan envisions to be a combination of housing, mountain preserve and desert open space.

Many Vistancia residents were alarmed at the prospect of a high-voltage transmission corridor – including power lines, access roads and support facilities – scarring a largely undeveloped area. They showed up at City Council meetings in droves, wearing red so their numbers wouldn't go unnoticed. After gaining the support of city officials, they turned out in force at hearings held by the Arizona Power Plant

and Transmission Line Siting Committee. Eventually, the Arizona Corporation Commission approved an alternative path along State Route 74.

Fast forward to today. Residents, developers, the city and even APS are united in support of the SR-74 option. But because federal land would be involved, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) must approve the plan. Busloads of red-clad residents turned out for a public meeting BLM held May 26 at the Peoria Community Center to scope out relevant issues to be addressed in a required environmental impact statement.

As a former newsman, I can tell you how often I've seen an issue burst forth, grab tons of attention and then disappear as soon as the next big story came along. That is why organization and follow up are such important aspects of civic engagement. As the groups from Ventana Lakes and Vistancia have demonstrated, committed and creative communities can lubricate the creaky wheels of government.

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