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By Nick Green

RPV homeowners council is finding its voice GRASS ROOTS: City officials turn to the group, which represents 41 associations, for feedback.

In recent weeks, the Rancho Palos Verdes City Council crafted guidelines for putting utilities underground, a major issue in the hilltop community where views in large measure determine property values.

But before approving the new policy, the council shipped its work to the Rancho Palos Verdes Council of Homeowners Associations so the Group could provide feedback.

It was a telling gesture toward what a year ago was a moribund organization bereft of leadership and down to just nine members.

Today, the homeowners council has a revamped board of directors, counts 41 homeowners associations as members — about half those that exist in the community — and boasts its first-ever Web site, a slick newsletter and a newly reinvigorated set of programs.

“They have become a real voice,” Councilman Larry Clark said. “Before, I think where we were was disparate, fractured voices from the community based on a particular set of self interests. But as the council of homeowners associations becomes much more broad-based and dynamic, it becomes a major player at the table.

“It provides a valuable voice to the elected city leadership and staff,” he added. “Conversely, it provides an information and idea conduit back to the various neighborhoods.”

The largely residential city has a tradition of citizen governance. It was residents, upset with the way developers and landowners were peppering its hillsides with high-density condominium projects in conjunction with a compliant county government, who led the way to the city’s 1973 formation.

But such activism requires activists, and along the way the homeowners council, originally formed in the late 1970s, lost its way as a new generation of leaders failed to replace those that had come before.

“People that were on it didn’t have the dedication and commitment to running it,” said Don Shults, who is now first vice president of the organization and has been active in the group since the late 1990s. “There was no incentive for people to come to meetings

other than express their concerns, vent if you will, and go home.”

No more.

The overhaul included changing the meeting format, so that the relatively dry, day-to-day functioning of the organization is performed in separate meetings by the seven-member board of directors.

General meetings of the membership were cut back to every other month and moved to Hesse Park — the seat of power in Rancho Palos Verdes, where the City Council holds its meetings.

And the meetings were made meaningful and useful.

At one, a law firm that specializes in handling the affairs of homeowners associations made a presentation on the fiduciary responsibilities of such groups.

At another, an insurance agency whose clients' are exclusively homeowners associations sent a representative to speak on the issue of rising insurance rates.

At its next meeting June 16, City Manager Les Evans is scheduled to discuss traffic calming in the city, which has emerged as a major issue for at least one homeowners association on the community's east side in recent months.

“To have someone come to every meeting you have to have something they want to come to,” said Second Vice President Sam Van Wagner.

The self-evident approach has worked. Meeting attendance has leaped from a dozen or so people to as many as 60.

Other initiatives have included holding a well-received candidates forum before the last municipal election, which gave the homeowners council a considerable boost in visibility. And city officials are invited to meetings on a regular basis, not to give presentations, but to mingle with the residents they serve.

“If you've met them in good times, it's easier to sit down and talk to them across the table about tough things,” said homeowners council President Jon Cartwright.

It's Cartwright who is given much of the credit for revitalizing the homeowners council. A veteran of 14 years of municipal service on the Planning Commission and View Restoration Commission, Cartwright began working with the council last summer and in September was elected president.

“He's really come on strong with a lot of good ideas and a gift for organization that's tough to beat,” Shults said. “I think he probably saw in the past that things were lacking in the organization. He's taken over and done a heck of a job.”

Its members are already reaping the benefits.

For instance, Steve LaPine, president of the 600-home Mira Vista Homeowners Association on the city's east side, credits the group and Shults with helping reverse a local school district policy he said excluded Mira Vista children from the well-regarded Cornerstone and Rancho Vista elementary schools.

"The organization itself is wonderful to have, it's awesome," LaPine said. "To think the homeowners association in your neighborhood actually has political clout is wonderful. ... You always have a voice in our city, no matter how small you are."

The homeowners council, which has the potential to become a potent grass-roots political voice, is still formulating how best to flex its muscles, Cartwright said.

For instance, yet to be decided is just what mechanism it should use to take positions on potentially controversial issues — or whether it should.

Being considered is whether the group should reach out to similar organizations outside the city to band together and work on regional issues — something that some elected officials in the four Peninsula cities have resisted doing.

And its leaders are wondering what role the group should play in such celebrations as Independence Day.

Still, its steady evolution toward becoming a practical resource for the city's homeowners associations shows no sign of abating.

Already representing a large chunk of the city's almost 16,000 households, the group is aiming to boost membership to 50 associations later this year. And Cartwright is already being mentioned by some as a potential City Council candidate to follow in the footsteps of former council President Doug Stern, who now sits on the City Council.

"It's a grooming ground for emergent leadership from the neighborhoods," Clark said. "I think our council of homeowners associations will become the model for this kind of citizen-based forum in the entire South Bay."