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Local News

Organization Undergoes a Renaissance

By Chris Boyd News Staff Writer

RPV -- One year ago this month, the Rancho Palos Verdes Council of Homeowners Associations struggled to attract nine associations to a meeting. But this Wednesday, members of 42 homeowners associations representing about 6,000 households packed the Fireside Room at Hesse Park for a CHOA meeting.

"Our primary purpose is to provide a forum for our members to discuss and debate important issues that affect our city and our members," said President Jon Cartwright, who last year with a corps of volunteers started to turn around a faltering CHOA. "At this point, our emphasis is really on growing our membership. We really want it to be an important forum on the Peninsula."

An eight-year veteran of the RPV Planning Commission and six-year member of the View Restoration Commission, Cartwright already has helped put CHOA in the middle of city politics by inviting a City Council member to every meeting. "We've been successful at bringing several things to their attention and getting them fixed," Cartwright said.

For one, CHOA members convinced officials to notify nearby residents before workers install cell phone antennas in the city's rights-of-way. Then in April, council members asked that CHOA review guidelines for underground utilities in RPV.

"We want to make sure that the city is headed in the right direction," Cartwright said.

"Historically, the Council of Homeowners Associations has been a good forum for the homeowners associations to get together and hear from city officials. The City Council itself is not a very good forum for discussion," said RPV Mayor Peter Gardiner, who will speak at the next CHOA meeting on Sept. 15. "This City Council has been supportive of seeking the advice of the community by using the CHOA as a forum for that."

Since the mid-1970s, when CHOA formed in part to help prevent a development-hungry Los Angeles County from turning RPV into a maze of dense seaside apartments and condominiums, the organization has seen membership rise and fall.

"It's had its up years and its down years," Cartwright said. "It's up again, and we're hoping to keep it up."

An effort to increase membership began last year, when CHOA members organized a marketing campaign "to acquaint people with who we are and what we do," Cartwright said.

Volunteers sent out a package with a letter from Cartwright and held a successful RPV City Council candidates forum televised by COX Cable in October. They also created a Web site and newsletter, amenities that members hadn't enjoyed previously.

"That gave us some momentum," Cartwright said. "It's been one brick at a time."

CHOA members aren't resting on their laurels, either -- they're working this summer to increase membership even more. "My guess is there's probably about 60 [associations], and maybe more, that are really viable," Cartwright said. "We feel comfortable that we can get to 45 or 50 member associations."

Resident Shirley Borke, who works with the group's Public Relations Committee, has watched as more than 50 people consistently fill Hesse Park's Fireside Room for meetings. "It's a pleasure to see it come along. It's a beautiful thing," she said. "I really think that it has a lot to do with Jon. He's capable, he's organized. He's had that vision, and he wants it to be a place that homeowners associations can come."

To streamline operations, members last year also reorganized CHOA so that officers meet once a month to discuss business. That leaves the regular meetings open for topics ranging from reducing traffic to effectively running a homeowners association.

"We're trying to put an equal emphasis on helping homeowners associations run their business," Cartwright said. "We're trying to give people a better idea of what insurance they need ... It's a place that says you don't have to be alone to deal with your problems."

With dedicated volunteers and future meeting topics like the city's hotly debated Natural Communities Conservation Planning program, Cartwright and company are confident membership will continue to grow. "We're successful because many people are spending lots of time making this a resource for the city," Cartwright said.

For more information about the RPV Council of Homeowners Associations, check out the Web site at www.palosverdes.com/choa.