

Following is an article written by Josh Cohen for the Peninsula News. This article appeared in the July 28th edition of the Peninsula News.

Eyes on Palos Verdes

Grassroots group PVP Watch keeps track of Peninsula issues with opinions that often run counter to the conventional.

By Josh Cohen
Peninsula News

RPV — Call them grumpy, call them champions of those who choose to remain silent, but don't call the founding members of the nascent grassroots group PVP Watch newcomers.

Four of PVP Watch's founders, Barry Hildebrand, Don Reeves, Ken DeLong and Ray Mathys, have a collective 140 years of experience with Peninsula issues. They are former members of traffic and parks committees, one is a former School Board member and another is a familiar RPV City Council candidate. Even Mathys' living room — a common place for PVP Watch members to debate one another while figuring out where next to take the Web-based political action committee — played an important role in RPV's earliest days. More than 30 years ago, the city's inaugural council held its first official meeting there following liberation from Los Angeles County.

"We sat around, right here, and said, 'Now what do we do?'" says Mathys, chuckling. "We had questions like, 'How do you hire a city manager?'"

Today, the living room continues to provide a forum for local political activism that often runs counter to conventional thinking. In this case, however, it's not about forming a city but, in members' opinions, about steering the city back to those founding values.

In a few short months, PVP Watch already has gained attention and notoriety by posting members' and group opinions that, for example, encourage people to vote no on RPV's proposed storm-drain user fee, or make arguments against the millions of dollars spent to purchase open space in Portuguese Bend or on expansion at the Point Vicente Interpretive Center. Members say golf courses and ball fields are better examples of open space "than preserving a bunch of exotic weeds," a statement that would have local environmentalists gasping for air.

While these opinions don't always prove popular, PVP Watch says it's providing a healthy dose of reality to a city that needs to stop and think about its future.

"I don't think these issues take into account the needs of the entire community," says Reeves. "Some people counter our arguments by saying we're disgruntled, but we feel we represent a lot of people who don't speak up. We feel that the city's priorities are all wrong."

Mathys says one of PVP Watch's purposes is to remind Peninsula residents, particularly those in RPV, of when local government "served the community, not

the community served the city. We formed the city for the purpose of having local control where the city is responsible to the community for public safety, public health and infrastructure.”

Now, members say the city has gotten away from that initial idea by courting “special interest” groups and “spending money that you need for the most important functions on all this stuff that isn’t” as vital.

Local Forum

Needless to say, some of PVP Watch’s position papers have garnered attention. In June, RPV officials immediately countered claims in a PVP Watch flyer against the user fee that the group had distributed at a council meeting and made available on its Web site. Some local council members have had informal contacts with PVP Watch members through e-mail correspondence.

Not only the city is taking notice. PVP Watch says it boasts about 400 members and has received thousands of e-mails. By employing the Internet, members say they can reach a wide audience and discuss issues to their heart’s content.

“The city is exercising every avenue it has to promote what it wants,” says DeLong. “We formed PVP Watch as a mechanism to distribute information. We felt that the editorial policies of our two local papers really did not do justice to what we’d like to see done.”

Members say the city has an unfair advantage over residents in getting the word out, with mediums ranging from television channels, Web sites, e-mail lists and newsletters.

“We’re trying to fill in the blanks left by either the media or the city,” says Reeves. “There’s a lot of ways to do that, and part of that is investigating the details. The devil is in the details.”

Those details, he says, reveal an entirely new picture than the one often presented by normal reporting sources.

“People always say to us, ‘If the user fee doesn’t pass, how do we pay for storm drains?’ Well, no one is arguing the need to repair our infrastructure,” says Reeves. “But I’ve got a list of budget line-items and I’ll bet I can find \$500,000 in there that can be put to better use.”

Still, as any budding group consisting of members “with some very hard opinions,” not everyone in PVP Watch agrees all the time. Papers posted on its Web site often include the name of the author — thus far, Reeves has done a majority of the writing — and those papers “are not necessarily presented by PVP Watch as its opinions and objectives,” DeLong says.

“I’ve got some bruises from the battles in here with these guys,” says Hildebrand. “But we all agree that the city is ... putting a lot of these wants ahead of its needs.”

“Priorities are exactly the issue,” says DeLong.

Aspirations

DeLong says PVP Watch will not attempt to field political candidates for local offices, although it will provide endorsements and its members are free to pursue elected positions.

Currently, the group sends out e-mails to its members and posts opinion papers on its Web site.

Members hope to branch out into other issues that extend beyond RPV. “We’re called PVP Watch and not RPV Watch for a reason,” says DeLong.

Reeves says he is currently investigating the School District’s latest attempt to place a facilities bond before local voters, and that the group soon will offer an opinion on that issue. It might also tackle issues that extend into surrounding communities like Torrance and San Pedro.

For now, PVP Watch is focusing on RPV issues in an attempt to counter what its members say is a change in the city’s leadership.

“The one thing I’ve seen differently in the last 30 years is that the City Council has changed,” says DeLong, “becoming more activist than what we had as a sleepy village council before. Before, the council took care of a few things and moved on. Now, we seem to have all these problems we have to go and solve and we make issues out of them.”

“In the old days, we had people who were more concerned about doing things for the community,” says Mathys. “Now, with the community serving the city, when the bureaucracy here says we’re short of money for something, we’ll just go out into the deep pockets of the community.”

Members admit there is a long way to go to enact change, but the response to the PVP Watch Web site, they say, has been overwhelmingly positive.

“People are telling us to keep it up,” says DeLong. “We’re looking to expand our e-mail list — we really haven’t had anybody ask us to take them off the list — and to continue to remind people about the issues.”

“One of the moments of truth will come shortly when we say we’ll need money in order to continue this,” says Reeves with a laugh. “But I think people are happy to have this kind of information. I’ve been getting a lot of encouragement.”

For more information about the group, visit PVPWatch.com.