

Community Reflections

by Gene Nelson



Power and politics... In Sebastopol?

On Tuesday, Feb. 2, and again on Feb. 16, the City Council of Sebastopol held a public hearing on Orchard Park, a proposed housing development north of town, off Highway 116.

What made this development intriguing was the fact that it was designed to include affordable homes. During the crowded hearings, several Sebastopol residents, of a variety of ages, stood and told moving stories of their inability to purchase homes in their home town. They made a strong plea for the approval of this development, many saying they wanted to live in the homes that would be constructed there. Indeed, there was already a waiting list!

But, when the vote was finally taken, these people learned the worth of moving true stories. A dozen or so isolated individuals had no chance against traffic concerns, fears of school overcrowding, density questions, arguments about quality of life and maintaining our rural character, and a politically powerful no-growth, housing-anywhere-but-in-my-neighborhood lobby. This particular project involved a controversial annexation, but I firmly believe that any "infill" affordable project would now be torpedoed by the same arguments. So much for campaign promises about affordable housing! The members of the Sebastopol City Council know who elected them

to office and who will keep them in office and it certainly wasn't—isn't—the people who cannot afford, and never will be able to afford, a home in Sebastopol. So, once again, Sebastopol has reaffirmed its intention to remain a safe haven for those who can afford \$250,000 homes. Low to middle income families, couples or singles looking for that first home, and certainly racial minorities need not apply! We do not want "them" to upset "our" sacred "quality of life."

For me this whole frustrating process has been yet another lesson in power and the use of power. I realize that the concept of power makes some of us uncomfortable. After all, we have seen it abused so many times. But the word, "power," comes from the Latin, "posse"—to be able. Thus power really is the foundation of our ability to take action. We need power in order to accomplish what we want to accomplish—both publicly and privately. Without power, we can huff and puff all we want, but we will never blow down the door. We will never even get our foot in the door!

Thus the question facing advocates of affordable housing is... do you want power in Sebastopol? Do you just want to complain at public meetings, or do you actually want to bring about changes? Isolated individuals telling their stories sound good but seldom if ever influence the votes of politicians. But a large group, organized and focused with well-defined objectives—consider the political successes of Sebastopol Tomorrow—becomes a force that any city council must take seriously.

It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, "What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love."

Without organizing for power, all of our talk of justice and love will remain just that... talk. Who has power? We all do. But... will we use it?