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COMMENTARY

Sebastopol Tomorrow responds to mayor 's attack

by Una Glass, Kathy Oetinger and Barry Chertov

Are you now, or have you ever been a member of ... Sebastopol Tomorrow? Believe it or not, several years ago this familiar sounding question was actually asked by a City Councilman of a prospective planning commissioner. In keeping with this overwrought attitude toward an informal but effective citizen's group, Sebastopol Mayor Sam Crump and Councilman Ken Foley attempted to kick Sebastopol Tomorrow off the Laguna Park Implementation Committee. Fortunately wiser heads prevailed and Councilmembers Ann Magnie, Kathy Austin and Bill Roventini voted to retain Sebastopol Tomorrow's seat on the committee, which it co-founded along with the Sebastopol Chamber of Commerce.

During the council session Crump voiced a number of insulting and accusatory remarks calling us illegitimate, not credible and questioning our finances. It is clear that we disagree with Crump and Foley, however, such contemptuous remarks are really out of line. If they wish to remove our position from the committee for political reasons they should just say so, but to attack our integrity, or that of any citizen's group, is unacceptable.

The Laguna Park Implementation Committee is a City Commission charged with finding ways to implement a future Laguna Park. It does not handle money and it does not set city policy. It has developed a suggested Work Plan listing the steps which must be taken to make the park a reality. The committee is strictly advisory to the City Council and can take no binding action of its own. Park funds reside in the City's coffers and any contractual actions on behalf of the park will be taken by city staff under the direction of the City Council. Essentially, the committee is powerless other than to make suggestions to the City Council. To dismiss Sebastopol Tomorrow from participation on the committee is petty politics at its worst. What happened to Crump's obviously hollow campaign slogan "working together works"?

The idea behind Sebastopol Tomorrow having a seat on the Laguna Park Implementation Committee, along with the Chamber of Commerce, the Laguna Foundation and others, was to get varying groups behind a common goal. Sebastopol Tomorrow was the group which first promoted the idea of a Laguna Park and pursued Laguna related issues long before anyone else. Richard Nichols, Sebastopol Tomorrow's representative on the Laguna Park Committee, is known by many because of his work with Coastwalk and is an environmentalist of statewide stature. He is the one individual who truly pioneered Laguna awareness.

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Time, money and family obligations all conspire against average citizens participating in democracy. That is why our democracy from Sebastopol to Sacramento and all the way to Washington is dominated by special interest groups which have something to gain (money and/or power) in the political process. When there is an opportunity for personal gain it is easy for a group to find the time, money and even professional staff, to lobby for their point of view. Grassroots organizations, including Sebastopol Tomorrow, are supported by people from many walks of life who care enough to spend some of their precious time working for what they believe to be the good of their communities. The time spent is in addition to its participants' normal work day. Participation does not advance your career or improve your business. In fact, participation can be quite costly. People who make the sacrifice of contributing something to their community should be respected whether you agree with them or not.

The past couple of years the focus of our attention was the Sebastopol Urban Growth Boundary Initiative, which Sebastopol voters overwhelmingly approved last November. We participated in the Downtown Plan Implementation Committee which directed new economic development downtown and included the construction of our town Plaza. During our General Plan Update we delivered notices to all citizens reminding them of neighborhood hearing dates so community input regarding our General Plan would be heard. We lobbied to keep traffic out of the neighborhoods and collect fees on development which will help to pay for future parks and city improvements. Many of the ideas presented in the city's recently released draft Economic Development Plan originated with Sebastopol Tomorrow.

Those who participate in Sebastopol Tomorrow are exercising their constitutional right to free speech and assembly. We are a grassroots organization which has worked informally for more than a decade with our primary function being to provide public information, and facilitate citizen participation. We spend almost no money because everything we do is done with volunteer labor. Our actions are entirely proper and legal. After all, citizen participation is supposed to be what democracy is all about. Our size and activities do not warrant our registering as a PAC, incorporating or anything of the kind. Although we disagree with the council majority to varying degrees on some issues, we presumably do agree that Sebastopol should have a Laguna Park. We look forward to helping make our Laguna Park a reality and working with other groups in our community to further this common goal.

(Una J. M. Glass, Kathy Oetinger and Barry Chertov are members of Sebastopol Tomorrow)

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