

## **Building Community: One Block At A Time**

Many of you may have heard about Building Community, the forums I sponsored last month in East County. Building Community is an attempt to define the problems and issues facing East County without all the political posturing that tends to muck things up.

In other words, I felt there was too much shouting going on which makes it difficult to hear what's being said.

In order to provide an objective perspective, I invited professors Jay Umeh and Michael Moon, faculty members of California State University East Bay, to facilitate the meetings. They are internationally known and have been asked by governments and cities around the world to act as consultants especially regarding change in the community.

The meetings were held on three separate Saturdays at the Antioch Senior Center and the Nick Rodriguez Theater.

I invited those people who I felt had demonstrated a commitment to East County. Some were in official and civic positions to do something about them. Others were ordinary people active in the communities. Because it was by invitation, I was able to ensure that every sector of East County was represented.

We sent out over 100 invitations and about 50 people showed up the first day. They came from Discovery Bay and Bay Point, from Bethel Island to Brentwood and of course, Oakley, Pittsburg and Antioch. Members of the faith community mingled with business people, educators sat next to Section 8 tenants, city officials had coffee with retirees, and Neighborhood Watch captains talked with county department heads.

After ground rules were established, i.e. No personal attacks, no booing or applause, respect for the speakers and keep comments brief, the group began to identify what they thought was wrong with East County.

Themes began to emerge. Much of the discussion swirled around youth activities, housing and economic development.

The second weekend was even more energetic as the participants -- some new many returnees -- broke into smaller groups to discuss those three subjects. Each group decided on their own two of the three topics that they thought they would focus on finding solutions. Two of the groups picked youth and economic development. The third group selected youth and housing.

At the end of the day, each breakout summed up their discussions to the larger group.

The third session was a summary of what the groups talked about, and expansion on the comments presented to the larger assembly. Sitting in a large circle, everyone had a

chance to speak up and voice their opinions or comment on some of the things said by others.

The professors are in the process of putting together a report of what was said and present their own findings of the Building Community process. The report will be presented to the Board of Supervisor in the middle of July. Some of my fellow supervisors are so enamored with Building Community they expressed a hope that they can involve their constituents in a similar event.

I intend to send a copy of the report to everyone who took part in the Building Community process.

I think the key word here is “process.” What that means is that the effort doesn’t end with the report. The report is simply a foundation upon which the Board of Supervisors, city councils, school boards and county departments and community agencies can build on.

The civic leaders, the decision makers, are assured that the content of the report came from the people without agendas. The facilitators did not tell the Building Community participants what to say. The content that came out of the forums are from reasoned voices, culled and encouraged by the facilitators without the rancor and heated emotion that has tainted other discussions.

The civic leaders in the council chambers and boardrooms will be able to create strategies to achieve some of the goals that will come from the report.

The Building Community process continues in the implementation of those action plans and the carry-through necessary to monitor progress.

It will take all of us to make East County what we want it to be. We shouldn’t tear each other down when we could be helping each other. Even if we are in disagreement, we should remember that our goal is the same: making East County a better place to live, to go to school and go to a nearby job.

With the rapid population growth and the shifting demographics that continues to take place in East County, it still takes people talking to each other and working towards common goals to build a community.

As they signed in, each participant received a T-shirt which said, “Building Community: One Block At A Time.”

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