

Leadership Class Belies Attitude of Cynicism and Apathy

ON MAY 17 I spoke at the graduation of the latest class of Leadership East County. That's a program by Delta 2000 which introduces interested individuals to the ins-and-outs of public service. This year's class is the 15th anniversary of the course.

You can find graduates of this program throughout East County in positions of leadership, on city councils, on school boards, city commissions and boards of some of the big corporations and the small nonprofits.

Jeanne Krieg heads Tri Delta Transit, Ruth Goodin holds an important grant writing role for Los Medanos College, Michael Kee is on Pittsburg's City Council, Bob Brockman serves on the Brentwood City Council, Susan Hurlis serves with Allied Waste Services and Anita MacKusick leads Delta 2000.

One of the biggest problems facing our society, our government, today is the cynicism that like a cancer, eats away at our public institutions.

The symptoms of this disease are distrust, apathy and a feeling of powerlessness. It isolates us from each other. There is a lack of passion and compassion for those who might have less ability and opportunity to succeed. Support for those who want to make things change for the better is found wanting.

Our public conversation is being reduced to simple soundbites or a catchy phrase. TV reports, where most people get their news, are long on image and short in substance. Is it any wonder that we celebrate when a meager 55 percent of our eligible voters go to the polls?

Some people have questioned why I am sponsoring the Building Community forums that are continuing on May 19 and June 2. Once again, cynicism darkens any effort to take positive steps.

I mentioned this book in one my earlier columns, "Bowling Alone – America's Declining Social Capital" by Robert Putnam. Putnam points to marked declines in civic involvement over the past 20 years ranging from a 25 percent drop in voter turnout to 25 to 50 percent declines in unions and civic organizations ranging from Boy Scouts to the Red Cross to PTAs.

I believe community participation in government is the cornerstone of democracy. From Bay Point to Bethel Island, I normally hold Town Hall meetings with residents. The Building Community forums is an extension of that effort. When people take the time to provide input to their government about the issues affecting the community, it not only strengthens the relationship between the public and its government, but often enhances the outcome of the policy decisions or projects being decided upon as well.

Public service takes on many forms, ranging from public/private partnerships, service on City boards and commissions, volunteering on behalf of City programs and services, joining Neighborhood Watch and addressing the City Council, the Board of Supervisors or our elected representatives in Sacramento or Washington on issues of interest to you or your neighbors.

Putnam points to a growing body of research that suggests that community problems ranging from health services, rising crime rates, drug abuse, education, poverty and effective government are directly related – negatively and positively – is directly related to how engaged citizens are with each other.

Unfortunately, civics courses in our schools have taken a back seat to passing the battery of tests required of our students. It is important to master the 3 R's but the 4th R, Responsibility, is too forgotten.

Programs such as Leadership East County provides the background for individuals to step from the back of the class to stand in the front. Students study, quality of life issues, education, health services, local and regional government, economic development, criminal justice, the courts, environmental influences, labor, business and industry and cultural heritage.

I congratulate the members of the 15th class of Leadership East County:

Rosa Armendariz, Rebecca Bridgen, Val Davis, Patty Deutsche, Carma Dutra, Ralph Garrow, Jr., Mindy Gentry, Marco Godinez, Jesse Golden, Phil Gottlieb, Anita Marquez, Shelley Murdock, Iris Obregon and Sean Wright.

Remember their names. They will make a difference. Some of these names will surely reappear in this newspaper in the coming months and years as they take more active roles in the life of East County by adding their voices to the public conversation that is taking place.

Applications for the next Leadership East County class are being accepted. For more information about the program, call Delta 2000 at 925-779-1404. Federal Glover is the County Supervisor for District 5. Reach him at dist5@bos.cccounty.us