

At the Table

Neighborhoods and other groups that have neighborhood interests at heart want to be at the table. Now is the time to let those who will be representing you on the City Council know that.

Your VJ neighborhood association has made that issue one of the questions it has asked the mayoral and District 8 candidates who are seeking your vote, i. e.:

Question 2. Open Process. It is the experience of our association that over the last 2 years city decision making has become opaque to private individuals and groups. Items are artificially put on ‘fast track’ and passed without real public scrutiny or input. Do you share this viewpoint? If so, what do you pledge to do to correct the problem? Explain - 100 words or less.

What I have observed and experienced is a process at City Hall that invites stakeholders to interact with staff to craft processes and future ordinances that have been requested by City Council members - in an effort to become more “efficient”. Sounds good, doesn’t it? The problem is the definition of “stakeholder.” Who gets to sit at the table initially?

We have heard time after time from our elected officials that we as the “neighborhood” or the “public” are “at the table.” However, this is normally after a group of stakeholders, which does not include us, has given their input to staff members, who draft the processes and ordinances and then offers them for review to us. That is not being “at the table.” “Being at the table” means that we get to influence the processes and ordinances from the very beginning. After all, we are the folks who are impacted by these processes and ordinances. Let me give you two examples:

1. The Pilot Digital Billboard Ordinance. It passed City Council on December 6, 2007, with very little knowledge or review by the public prior to the vote. City Council seemed to be surprised that there was opposition – 2 hours worth of angry reaction. They seemed to be unaware that previous City Councils had asked staff to conduct intensive public review processes that had resulted in a ban on any new billboards on many of the major corridors in San Antonio. So, the desire to ban billboards was not limited to a few “crazy people,” it was the desire of those impacted by the corridors who wanted good design – and that includes hundreds of folks. Why didn’t City Council know this? I submit it was because the stakeholders in the development of this ordinance at the very beginning did not include neighborhoods and certainly not Scenic San Antonio.

2. The “Dark Skies” Ordinance. We all say that we want to protect the military mission. Yet, there are two simple changes that could have been made to the ordinance that were pretty much ignored. First, the ordinance should have required LEED lighting standards for all new development, rather than the usual standards which will allow brighter lighting. The way the ordinance is written, not only will the overall impact of the lighting be brighter than it should have been – billboards get to be brighter than that. So as more development occurs and lighting increases, billboards get to top that. Second, it’s a little thing, but the way the ordinance deals with parking lots is counter to environmental design.

Scenic San Antonio, AIA and others offered these suggestions when they had the opportunity to review the ordinance drafts. But it was too late for meaningful input. The stakeholders had already had their say, and we were not “at the table”.

When you read through the surveys returned by the candidates and make your decision about who should be your next mayor or District 8 representative, look at their responses to Question 2. Will you “be at the table”?

June Kachtik, Chair
Scenic San Antonio