

Southwest neighborhood coalition seeks greater outreach

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

Southwest Portland's committed volunteers have accomplished wonders, but some worry that their ranks are growing thin. Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. (SWNI) board chair Brian Russell voiced this concern at the September 23 meeting.

"We've become a core of people who do all the work," Russell said. "We need to do more to get people to follow behind. There are people who come out once a year for an ivy pull; we need to get them out two or three times a year."

Neighborhood leaders also have to recruit potential successors to themselves, he said.

It quickly became evident that Russell had struck a common cord, and SWNI executive Director Sylvia Bogert said it was "a city-wide issue. People are willing to volunteer, but when asked to take ongoing responsibility they pull back."

Jim Thayer of the Southwest Hills Residential League (SWIRL) said his organization is "run by four or five people." They have recently held events that brought out large crowds, "but did even one of them offer to join SWIRL? No. If you're the chair, the only way to leave is to resign or die." He added, "Looking

around this table, I'd ask, where is our diversity?"

Traditionally, major issues and perceived threats tend to bring people out to neighborhood meetings in large numbers. However, SWNI land use chair John Gibbon said, "The big land use projects are basically gone in southwest Portland."

Jim McLaughlin of West Portland Park suggested facetiously that the group engineer a proposal to install a nuclear power plant at Jackson Middle School as a recruiting technique.

Some people present suggested that local public schools, and the issues surrounding them, represent good grounds for recruiting, and board member Janet Hawkins said that school families represent more diversity than SWNI has. Russell disagreed, saying, "School PTA meetings are a lot like ours."

Thayer agreed, saying, "When we

tried contacting school families, we had a real hard time connecting. These people are focused on their kids."

SWNI treasurer Tom Schuper commented, "Did you stay in the PTA after your kid left school?" He has served on the City Bureau Advisory Committee and said it was "nice, because the commitment had an end date. It's bite sized."

In addition to the more global discussion of participation in general, there were specific thoughts about increasing public involvement in the SWNI board.

Thayer suggested moving the monthly SWNI board meeting from the Multnomah Center, where the Southwest Neighborhood Office is located, to other locations. "Why don't we move into everyone else's living room?" he asked. "This is much more comfortable, but it's a way to get out and mingle."

McLaughlin suggested changing

the meeting time from Wednesday evening to a Saturday morning when, he suggested, more people will be able to attend.

The SWNI board expressed interest in three possible approaches: Having a yearly "guest night" at which the public at large would be invited to come and the agenda would be geared to familiarizing them with operations and issues; having the meetings move to different locations once or twice a year; and having board retreats in outlying locations.

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