

Volunteers provide lifeblood for projects in Farmington

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Even though the future of the Farmington Beautification Commission remains in limbo, city officials and residents alike agree that volunteerism itself continues to be the lifeblood of virtually every important project and decision that faces the small municipality.

There currently are more than 100 volunteers from all walks of life filling various city boards and commissions which represent everything from arts to zoning.

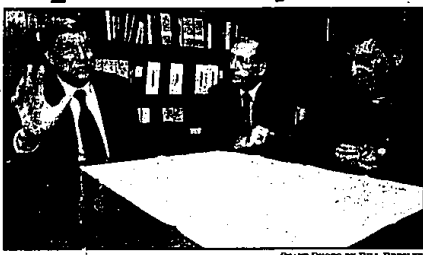
"Even our reserve officers are volunteers," noted Mayor Bill Hartsock, who happens to also serve on four of the groups.

Other than the hole left by the early February disbandment of the beautification commission, due to dwindling membership, most of the other entities are in good shape numbers wise.

Probably nobody on that impressive list of volunteers has more service to Farmington than 82-year-old William Burke. His volunteerism career includes about 40 years on the planning commission and a decade or so on the zoning appeals board; he is an active member on both.

"I'm a volunteer," said Burke in a matter-of-fact fashion. "Something is fulfilling about doing things in and for my community — for me."

Hartsock takes the work done



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRESLER

Giving time: Gary Goss, Bob DeCorte and Duane Reynolds volunteer on the traffic committee.

by volunteers very seriously, and is looking forward to a study session set for 7 p.m. Monday, March 19 at Farmington City Hall when the council will discuss the future of the beautification commission.

Ideas likely to be tossed around the conference room will include whether a reconstituted commission, which was allowed nine members by charter, would require a larger roster, different rules or a change in philosophy.

"This allows us to sit down and collectively discuss what we do next," Hartsock said. "It's important, if we take it in a different direction, that we set it aside for a short period of time. And with

the number of people who have expressed an interest in it, I think it will be a short period of time."

Not just flowers

Apparently, some power members did not fully grasp the responsibilities required to sufficiently serve the commission, including judging homes and businesses for the annual awards program.

"Maybe there's a misconception about beautification," said Patricia Shelton, who chaired the now-defunct commission. "Maybe people think it's only flowers, rather than the whole beautification award review each year."

According to Shelton, fewer people volunteered for the commission in because they thought it was "a commission without much responsibility."

Having a smaller group doing the job apparently led to burnout and unhappiness.

"They were asked to give up a lot of personal time, especially during the award period, to go out visually checking businesses for potential awards," said City Manager Frank Lauff. "Maybe we need to expand the roster."

Lauff suggested that more in the way of communication and solicitation of people of the "baby boomer" generation might be one way to bring in new recruits, for all of the boards, commissions and committees.

"Maybe their kids are out of the house now," Lauff said. "Hopefully, they have more time and (they) will think about it. Our responsibility is to try and put this issue in front of these people. They've probably never thought about volunteering for their city."

Burke acknowledged the city probably has a "selling job" in front of it. But he thinks it is worth the effort, particularly to revive the beautification commission, one which does so much to promote community pride.

"I personally don't want to see it stop," Burke said.

Neither does Hartsock, who hopes the commission is resurrected in time to continue the

annual awards program.

Where they serve

The volunteers who toil for the city are both high-profile, sitting at the long table in council chambers on "official" boards and commissions (several which also serve the city of Farmington Hills), and low-key, doing their work behind the scenes or out in the community.

There are volunteer groups in place for the Governor Warner Mansion, Southwestern Oakland Cable Commission, Downtown Development Authority, Commission on Children, Youth and Families and Traffic and Safety Board.

Serving on the latter is Public Safety Director Gary Goss, who meets once a month with six board colleagues to go over important issues concerning traffic flow and safety.

He also is always looking to recruit volunteers for the reserve officers force. The city permits up to 20; currently there are 11 and two are in training. Usually five reserves are hired every year, but the same number also leaves.

"The more the merrier," Goss said. "They are a legitimate enhancement to the service we provide."

It takes a year to train reserves. Candidates must attend a reserve police academy, become a licensed medical first-responder and attain the same

level of firefighting training as do full-timers, Goss explained.

Reserves help patrol special community events such as the Farmington Founders Festival and Memorial Day Parade, among other duties. Although reserves are not paid for police services, those who help assist in firefighting duties do receive financial compensation.

Valued

Hartsock and the rest of the council are required to serve on city boards and commissions. But without others stepping up to fill in the shoes, a lot of important work might not get done.

Hartsock noted that being a volunteer sometimes can be perceived as a thankless job. But both cities make it a point to formally recognize them for their efforts whenever possible.

"That's not just to reward them for what they've done, but to encourage others (to volunteer)," Hartsock explained. "Volunteers are very much depended on and make significant contributions, regardless of their interests and talents. We draw from all these talents and do the things that we do."

Getting new volunteers to sign up might not be an easy task with today's fast-paced and demanding society. But older helpers like Burke just enjoy doing for their city.

"I love it," Burke said. "I want to stay with it as long as I can."

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