

Oldsters form power bloc to press for town center

By MIKE SCANLON

Being old usually means being weak—physically and politically. But in one Detroit suburb, older residents appear to have discovered that collective lobbying may be better than Geritol for what ails them.

The muscle-flexing in Garden City began several months ago when the city council took up a proposal for a community center.

Support for the center has been highlighted by frequent, mass turnouts of older persons at city council meetings, a tactic which has often met with success when used by their younger neighbors to fight rezonings and school closings.

"We're going to keep pushing them hard," said Patrick Hamill, chairman of the council advisory commission on aging.

While it's nothing new for city council to face large, generally angry groups in opposition to measures under consideration, the seniors' bloc varies in some important ways.

For one thing, they are not opposed to anything. They are in favor of the center. Their general attitude in dealing with council publicity might best be

termed as respectful cajolery, not anger.

Perhaps most important, however, have been their numbers and stamina. Council has been considering the community center for months. At meetings during that time, seniors have never numbered less than 40, or about half the capacity of the council meeting room. When the seniors show up, they make a crowd. As time passes, the crowds tend to get larger instead of smaller.

Sweet or bitter, the fruit of their efforts will probably be known June 19, when city council is expected to consider converting a vacant elementary school for use as a center.

Whether the seniors will turn out to be the same kind of "one issue" bloc as most recent activist groups is a question no one knows the answer to.

Hamill said the large crowds have been the result of meetings between leaders of the various senior groups in town where they were "urged to talk it up and get behind it among their members."

A step which Hamill said was recently taken was the contact by mail with ministers throughout town.

"We have I don't know how many thousands of senior citizens out there

who haven't been touched," said Fred Foley, 74.

A subsidized housing complex for senior citizens, The Tower, is located adjacent to city hall and is home to many of the seniors who have attended council meetings.

Foley said a group called the, "Residents Association" involves a network of monitors and delegates on each floor of the building who contact residents when their presence is wanted at a meeting.

"We have practically what you'd call a government here," said Foley. "You could call the monitors congressmen and the delegates our senators."

Foley said he's one of two delegates-at-large and auditor for the group.

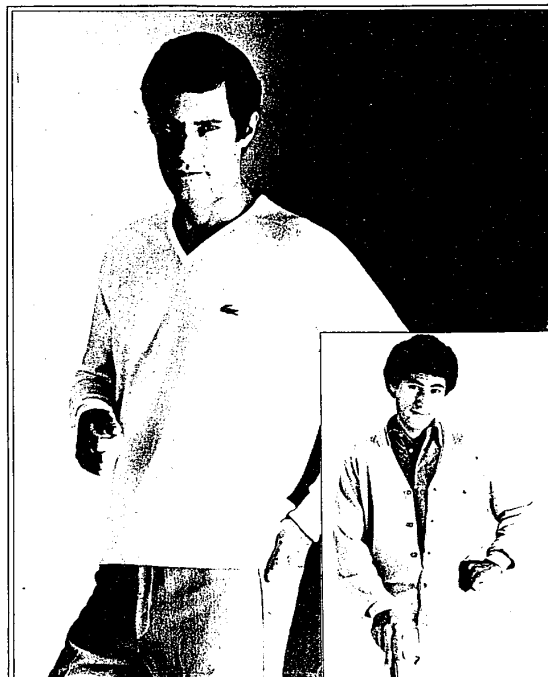
"My guess is they did help focus on that particular need or problem," said City Manager Dana Miller in reference to the community center.

Miller said council had a "50-50" chance of approving the center without pressure from the seniors, but he doesn't believe the seniors will continue to be an active political force.

Councilman Ronald Tyszkiewicz disagreed.

"They're going to become more and more of a watchdog for the community," said Tyszkiewicz, who attributed the seniors' apparent power to "a few people who are politically astute and who understand that if you want something, you have to turn out for it."

"They've showed they can come en masse, and I think one success may lead to another," he said.



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