

Real Life
Ghostbusters
page 16

THE ZEPHYR

50¢

www.thezephyr.com

GALESBURG, ILLINOIS

VOLUME 19, NUMBER 25

NOVEMBER 22 — THE FIRST DAY BOOMERS WILL NEVER FORGET

NOVEMBER 22, 2007

To your health

Political action key to creating Knox County Health Department 15 years ago

By Caroline Porter

By all standards the Knox County Health Department is efficient and successful and Knox County citizens should be celebrating its 15 years of operation this month. The referendum establishing the department and a tax levy to fund it was finally passed in 1992. The new board was formed quickly, consisting of physicians Carl Strauch and Lynn Greeley; Jay Sandercock, dentist; Betty Nelson, chairman, and director of Social Services at Cottage Hospital; Gayle Keiser, county board; Jim Hanks, representing restaurant and food service; Roger Meyers, city government, and Leon Campbell, citizen at large.

One of their first and best actions was to hire Greg Chance as administrator of the Health Department. He, along with his boards and staff, has directed the expansion of health department services and the building of new facilities on Fremont Street, without raising the levy. Building expansion for additional dental services is in the works. Serving in the department from the beginning, Chance has also garnered \$9.6 million dollars in federal and state grants. A fine promotional piece about the health department was included in the Sunday *Register-Mail* and details the many programs available to a county community where the number of citizens receiving Medicaid in 2007 reached 10,046, or 19.1 percent of the population. Programs of environmental health, chronic disease and clinical services, family health and health education, and promotion are based on three countywide community health assessments and plan development projects by the department administration. The brochure includes the facts the department has administered over



County Board Member Gayle Keiser talks to reporters after she and a group of supporters filed over 4,000 signatures with the County Clerk on August 17, 1992 to put a referendum forcing the establishment of a Knox County Health Department on the November ballot that year.

28,570 childhood immunizations, dental health to over 17,200 low-income patients, and 40,500 flu shots.

The health department also plays a key role in the development and implementation of plans for massive health emergencies caused by terrorism or other communicable diseases.

But the health department didn't just rise up out of a vacuum. Many citizens of Knox County worked hard to get the issue on the ballot and achieve a positive vote two times in the 35 years before 1992. The Knox County Board, which could have placed the issue on the ballot so citizens could express their wishes, refused to do so. So citizens groups had to organize petition drives to put the question on the ballot, then work to pass the referendum. In 1972 and 1976, citizens supporting a health department were sadly disappointed in the results of their work and the negative and strong reactions to establishing a health department.

1972 Referendum

In 1972, members of the Visiting Nurses Association (VNA), led by Genevieve Hagerty, brought up the issue of establishing a county health department. According to library records, in January of 1972, Dr. Henry Hauser, a Sociology professor at Knox College, reported on a meeting to form a steering committee that included representatives from the Knox County Medical Society, St. Mary's Hospital, the League of Women Voters, Tri-County Mental Health Association, several churches, VNA, Department of

Children and Family Services, the Salvation Army and representatives from Oneida, Abingdon and Knoxville. The committee established four subcommittees and named itself the County Health Improvement Committee (CHIC). Mrs. Ralph Vinson, of Oneida, was chairman. Mrs. Sidney Lewis, of Abingdon was petition chair and Dr. Hauser was publicity chair. One county board candidate, Caroline Goltermann, publicly took a stand on the issue and attended meetings. (Now Porter).

The petition drive was successful, but the issue was defeated by 861 votes, winning in the City of Galesburg, but losing in the rest of the county. When asked if the group would try again in two years, Mrs. Vinson responded, "Our little group is done, and it's sad. But we're ready for a break."

1976 Referendum

The next effort was made in 1976. This time well-known Galesburg resident Felix Bengston was chairman, Mrs. Harold Liston of Knoxville was head of public relations and steering committee members included George Onion, manager of the local Illinois Department of Public Aid, Dr. Henry Hauser and Phyllis Riess, president of the Galesburg League of Women Voters. Public meetings included presentations by James Masters, head of the long-established Fulton County Health Department.

Phyllis Riess, still a resident of Galesburg, remembers her feelings when the referendum lost badly, 10,045 no votes, 6,656 yes votes.

I was devastated, she recalls. I didn't understand it. It was a good campaign run by excellent people. But I was so naive. The opposition seemed to be run by county board member Harold Wilson, who seemed to be bringing in people from Fulton County to talk against it. By the time our speakers would get in front of a small group, we would be greeted by accusations and negative questions. The theory being promoted was that a new department would represent uncontrolled growth of government and once it was established, we could never get rid of it. The *Register-Mail* reported that county board member Caroline Goltermann made a motion for the county board to support the referendum and Harold Wilson successfully moved to table the issue.

"It was such a shock, but it was a time when a lot of young women coalesced around a need, were galvanized by the issue, which probably carried over to 1992 (referendum). There were a lot of kids at the meetings. I really admired and respected those young women."

Riess tried to recall some of the women of the community who worked on both referendums and suggested the names of Marie Haven, Kathy Smith, Gerry Cantwell, Gloria Meyer, Maggie Smith, Julie Young and Lillian Michelson. She remembers George Onion as being an informative and steady force on the steering committee. She holds a profound respect for chairman Felix Bengston.

See HEALTH DEP'T...page 17

HEALTH DEP'T...from page 1

She noted the *Register-Mail* reporter covering the health department referendum was Andrea Ferretti, who later, then Andrea Vitale, was president of the League of Women Voters and played a key role in the successful 1992 referendum.

1992 Referendum

The successful 1992 referendum for a health department was not without its controversies. According to news reports, county board member Chris Winick raised the issue early in the year. Betty Nelson and Andrea Vitale of the League of Women Voters approached leaders of the Knox County Board, who agreed to place the referendum on the ballot. A citizen's task force was organized by Nelson and Vitale to work with the board. Task force members included Dr. Ajita Kale, executive director of Family Planning Services of Illinois, Jane Robertson, executive director of VNA and Dr. Carl Strauch. County board leaders Dick Allen and Don Anderson and the task force recommended the referendum not be held during the 1992 general presidential election but at the 1993 April Township and municipal election. County board member Gayle Keiser and others felt the referendum being on the ballot at a time when few people vote was a recipe for disaster.

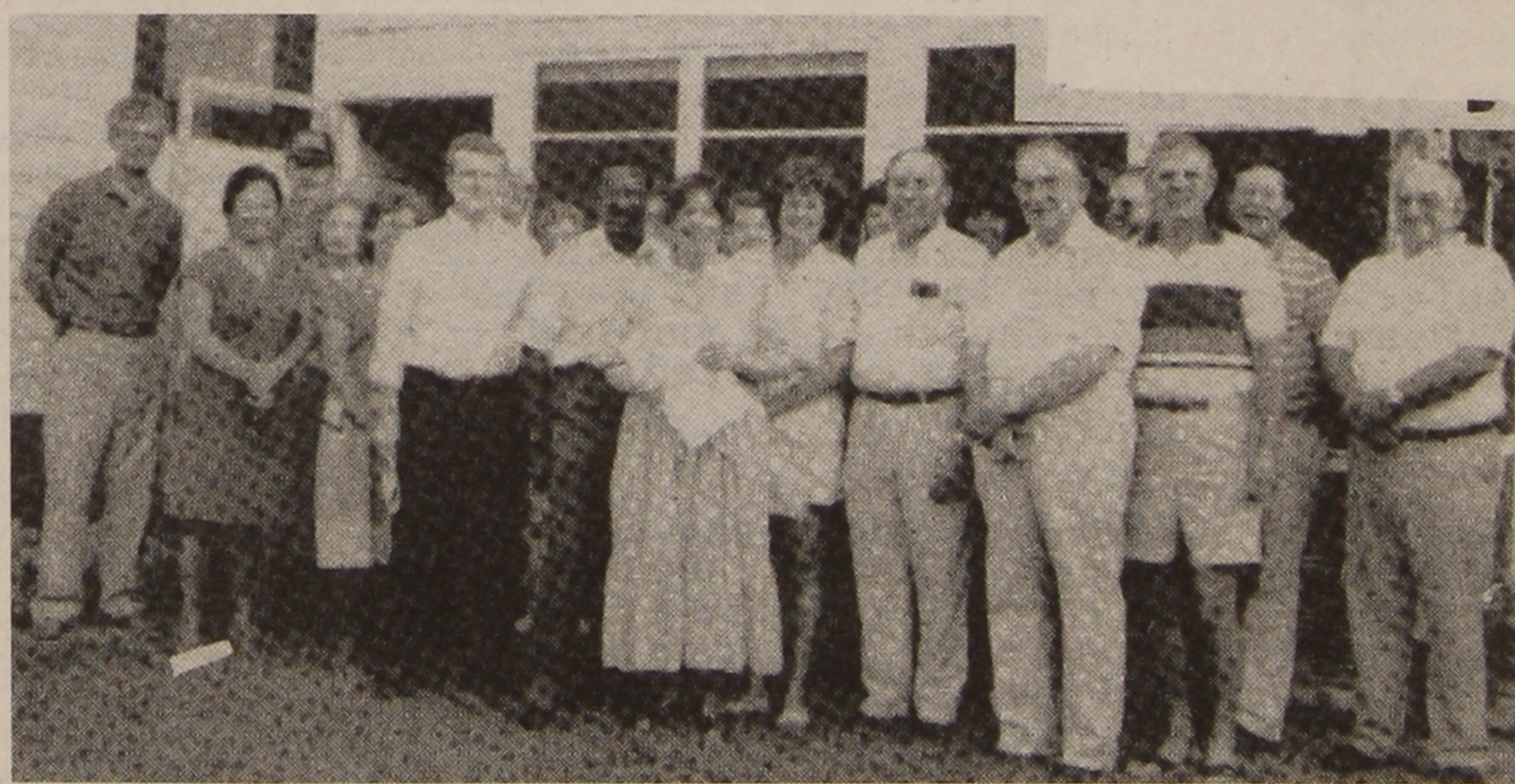
Keiser proceeded to organize a petition drive to get the issue on the ballot for the November general election, not only

establishing a health department, but also providing a tax levy to support it. When task force members realized the county board had no intentions of funding the department, they disbanded as a county board entity and supported the November referendum.

Even though task force and League members asked that the issue not be partisan, it was mainly Democratic Party activists and county board candidates who garnered 4,000 signatures, almost 2,000 more than needed, on petitions asking for the general election referendum. At this point, League members, party activists and other supporters worked together to pass the referendum. In the midst of the campaign, Jane Robertson of the VNA announced they could not keep up with increasing immunization needs in the county. At an informational meeting about the health department, she told the audience that services for communicable diseases and maternal and child health needs should be provided by an official health department.

Supporters of the new agency built their campaign around immunizations for children, restaurant inspections, ground water inspections, communicable disease control and other health-related services needed in the county.

The referendum passed by a margin of 1,767 votes. What would make such a



Among the community activists who rallied in support of the petition drive to get the Health Department referendum on the November 1992 ballot were Linda Fainter, Joyce Bean, Paul Steenis, Bruce Weik, Caroline and Dale Porter, Gayle Keiser, Lomac Payton, Steve and Louisa Buck, Tom Tourlentes, Bill Butts, John Weese and Steve Day-Kaufman.

difference in the 16-year interim since the last referendum? It was an unflattering fact that Knox County was one of only 14 counties out of 102 in the State of Illinois without a health department. The year of 1992 was called "The Year of the Woman," when there were more women candidates and women won more elections than any time before. Political scientists chalk up women's sharpened attitudes to their reaction to the Senate Judiciary hearings of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, wherein his former intern and then law

professor, Anita Hill, testified about sexual harassment. The arrogance and blatant bias of the male Senate committee members infuriated American women. They showed it at the polls. It's no surprise that women are traditionally more concerned about social and family issues. They saw the need for a health department in Knox County and they voted.

Congratulations to administrator Greg Chance, the board members for the past 15 years, and the staff for a job well done.