

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Galesburg Committees and Commissions — why bother?

A front page article in the Sunday Register-Mail moaned about how hard it is to find volunteers to serve on city commissions and committees. My husband and I have both served on such committees and I can tell you why it's hard to get members to attend or citizens to volunteer.

Word gets around.

Members often don't attend because they've discovered it doesn't make any difference whether they are there or not. They've found the committee on which they serve has no authority and it won't make a difference what they do. They've discovered that if the committee comes to different conclusions than those of the city administrators, the decisions won't be accepted. In short, it's a waste of time.

They've been bamboozled into thinking their opinions will be valued by the city.

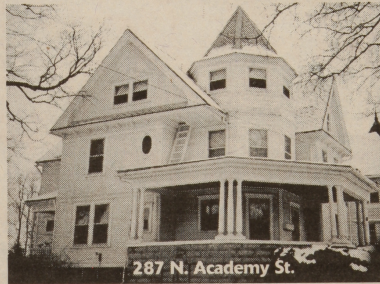
My husband was appointed to the Board of Local Improvements in 1997. A letter to him telling of his appointment is the only communication he has ever received. The letter stated, "The Board meets when a special project is being considered; you will be advised by Lyman Jensen when a meeting will be held." It also states, "all ordinances for local improvements to be paid for wholly or in part by special assessment or special taxation shall originate with the Board of Local Improvements."

If the Board of Local Improvements has no function during all the housing development, the Henderson Street project, construction of industrial parks, TIF districts and Enterprise Zones and other construction going on in this city, then the purpose of the committee should be re-examined. There's no excuse for the committee never meeting and members not being appraised of its status.

My husband was also appointed to the Rental Housing Board of Appeals in July of 1999. He owned and managed an independent insurance agency for 35 years and has a good background in insurance underwriting and the hazards of faulty wiring, lack of fire escapes, etc. The committee met to consider appeals from landlords who had been cited for code violations and tenants had complained. We took pictures of the structures involved, which my husband took to the meetings. One landlord involved is on the Board of Appeals, but excused himself for the vote.

It was explained that even though all standards referenced in the Building Code and Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA) are current, the code under which the building was originally constructed is the criterion to which the existing building is compared for code compliance. In other words, all of the dilapidated, unsafe buildings under consideration were "grandfathered." The landlords were there, crying about how much money it would cost to make their buildings safe, and apparently their making money is more important than the safety and lives of their tenants. Frankly, if one can't afford to provide safe and decent living conditions as a landlord, that's their problem and they ought to get out of the business.

Some of the complaints? At 287 N. Academy St., there is no second escape from a third floor apartment — except for a trap door in a pantry that leads to a porch roof. How one is supposed to get down from there, I can't imagine.



At 912 N. Kellogg St. A window in a basement apartment is not large enough to be used as a second exit.

1316 E. Knox St., Apts. 1 and 2, windows are not large enough to be used as second exits and the secondary exits from the third floor apartments don't meet the code. Four other properties by another owner were not in compliance with current codes and the fire department was instructed to "resolve the issues with the owner."

It was obvious to my husband that in fact, nothing was going to be done, and with resignation, he seconded the motion for whatever had just transpired.

There have been no further appeals and the committee has not met since March. But then, why would a tenant bother to complain? Why would a committee member attend another meeting? Absolutely nothing was accomplished and the tenants in lifethreatening situations are still there.

The Rental Housing Board of Appeals should be meeting to write another housing ordinance with some teeth in it, to give themselves some authority and get it through the City Council. At this point, this board of appeals is only for landlords who have been cited for code violations. What recourse do tenants have?

When I was a member of the Human Relations Commission in 1973, we found ourselves working with a weak ordinance that was unenforceable, and we sure found ourselves in a lot of controversy over nothing.

I think committees and commissions are formed to give the illusion that citizens are involved in the decisionmaking process, which in most cases, they are not. And that's the real reason why there is such a lack of interest.

But then, the only people who can correct this situation is us — You and me. For example, we should be bugging the Rental Housing Board of Appeals to do what they were asked to do — "review and recommend to the City Council changes in the rental housing inspection program requirements." Current members of all committees should insist their committees either have some clout or dissolve the committee. The system now is a sham.

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