

Roots rising

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more aggressive approach to crime fighting in the city. In the past two years at least five “ward meetings” or neighborhood watch-type groups have sprung up to address issues as diverse as the city itself.

“We’re creating transparency in the work we do,” said Rebecca Martin who helped found the Ward 9 group this year. “There’s a structure and a pointed focus to be consistent. By setting things up this way we see residents coming out and wanting to participate. It’s like a civic lesson.”

The Ward 9 meeting began, like many similar groups, in response to a hot-button neighborhood issue. Back In December 2006, Martin set up a neighborhood meeting featuring Mayor James Sottile and Police Chief Gerald Keller to discuss the sale of knives and other weapons at a Broadway gas station. After the meeting, a City Hall sit-down between Martin, Sottile and the shop owner led to the knives’ removal.

Since then, however, the informal group has branched out. Monthly meetings at the Muddy Cup coffee bar start with an open comment period, move

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Rebecca Martin stands on West Chestnut Street, where she lives and organizes a Ward 9 community group.

involved,” said Ryan.

Like the Ward 9 Meeting, the Midtown Neighborhood Watch meets once a month and features a speaker to address a particular topic. The meeting also features reports by members who attend common council and police commission meetings and a table full of literature on everything from tenants’ rights to voter registration.

As the name implies, the group also employs a network of block-watchers who report suspicious activity to police. Ryan said about 75 people attended the last meeting. This summer, a spin-off group, the Henry Street Action Committee began organizing to address the drug dealing that plagues the street, where police recently raided three alleged crack dens.

“The main thing is crime,” said Ryan. “That’s what people are most concerned about in this neighborhood, that’s what people want to talk about.”

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other factors were driving the recent increase in community involvement. For one thing, Madsen said policies at the federal level were beginning to have an adverse impact on the municipalities and especially middle class and low income families.

“There’s a lot of unrest out there and it’s starting to filter down to the local level,” said Madsen. “People are becoming really concerned about what they’re getting from their government for their tax dollars.”

Madsen added that technology — specifically the internet — has made it easier for community members to stay in touch with each other and their elected officials through newsgroups and e-mail alerts.

“The conversation going on the net has just blossomed, even since the last general election,” he said. “Now, when you exchange information with a constituent, you know it’s being cc’d to everybody. It’s changed the way people communicate with their elected officials.”

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on to a guest speaker addressing a particular topic and end with a discussion about possible action or the formation of a committee to explore an issue. Currently, committees of Ward 9 members are exploring the idea of a Kingston land trust, how to slow down traffic on residential streets, and other issues.

"The topics always spur some kind of idea," said Martin. "Somebody just jumps up and runs with it."

The Ward 9 meeting has earned praise from elected officials for its moderate tone and non-adversarial approach a contrast, they say with the neighborhood meetings that descend into "bitch sessions."

"You can see a real difference in terms of success between groups which are proactive and want to work with elected officials and the ones that want to stand there and complain and not offer any realistic solutions," said Alderwoman Jennifer Ringwood (D-Ward 2) who has founded two neighborhood-based community organizations.

Arthur Zaczekiewicz, a leader of the Ward 9 meetings says the group aims for a cooperative rather than confrontational approach with city officials.

"We're not a political group, we don't have a political agenda," said Zaczekiewicz. "It's about our neighborhood and our city and it's about long-term solutions."

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The recently formed Ward 1 and 2 groups put together by Ringwood and fellow Alderman Al Teetsel (R-Ward 1) developed after discussions in the county legislature about turning the old county jail on Golden Hill into a transitional housing facility for recently released sex offenders. Ulster County lawmaker Frank Dart (D-Kingston) who chairs the legislature's criminal justice and safety committee made a presentation on the issue to about 50 concerned citizens. Ringwood said getting good speakers to discuss hot topics — along with a lot of legwork — is the key to getting grassroots community groups off the ground.

After a neighborhood group begins to gel, though, it takes energetic leadership to expand the focus and prevent the organization from falling apart once a particular controversy dies down.

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While election year politics may play a role in some groups (Gordon Webb's Safest City Coalition is explicit in its calls to turn out the current administration) Alderman Mike Madsen (D-Ward 9) said

other factors were driving the recent increase in community involvement. For one thing, Madsen said policies at the federal level were beginning to have an adverse impact on the municipalities and especially middle class and low income families.

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Left behind

Different strokes

While Martin and Zaczekiewicz can count on a warm welcome at City Hall, the same cannot be said for Matthew Ryan who took over leadership of the TenBroeck Avenue Neighborhood Watch started by Jennifer Ringwood and renamed it the Midtown Neighborhood Watch. Ryan, who moved to Kingston from New York City two years ago, said he initially worked closely with the Sottile administration on neighborhood cleanups and efforts to improve Van Buren Street park; but he became frustrated by the city's lack of response to crime, drugs and quality of life problems in the neighborhood around his Downs Street home.

By this summer, when Ryan entered the race for Fourth Ward Alderman, relations with City Hall had soured to the point where Sottile personally recruited another Fourth Ward community activist, Shirley Whitlock, to run against him for the Democratic nomination. Ryan and his supporters frequently criticize what they see as neglect of Midtown by the city.

"I think there's a renewed interest [in community groups] because people are concerned about what's going on in their neighborhood, they want to get in-