

Becker on the Inner City

Why not speak of the good of a neighborhood?

There is no greater surprise than to wake up to the newspaper and find oneself the subject of an editorial. Your comments, while interesting, have left many Inner City residents disturbed by your misperceptions of both the neighborhood and the civic association.

Solutions to our complex social problems are not effected easily and many of the proposed solutions, to date, have left the black community divided. It is this division of black opinion that I, as Inner City Civic Association president, must now seek to understand.

To speak as your editorial does in the simple extremes of black and white, oldtimer and newcomer, suggests that black, white and Hispanic neighbors neither share nor have ever shared any common values. Indeed there are many shared concerns, such as the want for a um to a quiet, peaceful streetscape. During his tenure, outgoing association President Jesse Jennings personally supported the passage of an anti-loitering law (as did other black civic association presidents), championed Inner City black residents' want to curtail the mess that resulted from the Hopkins House church-sponsored lunch program, and now he wants — and is being criticized for wanting — B&E Discount Grocery to improve its business practices.

Jesse is not a newcomer to this neighborhood: He lives in his father's house. He is not unfamiliar with the problems associated with B&E's business: He lives next door to the establishment. Jesse is a proven civic leader. He is black, not white, and he is acting on the strength of a petition that includes more black signatures than his own.

Sadly, Jesse is not the first civic association president to be bullied while in office. His predecessor, Carol Johnson, had her car purely rear-ended and bottles thrown through her living room window. The police caught Carol's assailant, and the police detective who visited Jesse also has visited me. So

what? Carol Johnson was there to pick up the gavel from Mitchell Griffin; Jesse Jennings from Carol, and now I from Jesse. A public is bullied only for so long before the tactic becomes obvious.

The editorial's tabloid tone is a little disappointing. Why does the Gazette Packet not speak to the good health of a neighborhood reclaiming itself, the combined courage of its leaders and citizens? Why does the editorial not speak to the cost of crime and alcohol abuse in terms of time, money, injury, loss of self-esteem and social malaise? If B&E's supporters have been interviewed, why does the editorial not outline their specific suggestions for alcohol reform?

The association's vice presidential nominee is black and has a family history here that dates back 100 years. She lives in one of our worst blocks and also finds your portrayal of the neighborhood lacking. Upon reflection, your editorial has reminded me of a line from Dr. Martin Luther King's 1963 "I have a Dream" speech: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Well, if I may paraphrase, I am striving for the day when a neighbor will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. And character building is what the Inner City Civic Association is all about. We are about the business of creating a peaceable environment and, toward that end, we have acted on the common concerns of improved lighting, noise reduction, litter control, safer traffic signals, improved traffic flows, controlled development and a reduction in crime, drugs and alcohol abuse.

It would be helpful if the Gazette Packet would report the B&E story in context. The civic association

began acting on the neighborhood's crime and alcohol problem two years ago. The association's first action, with the council's assistance, was to close the white-owned establishment known as E&J Carryout at Princess and West streets. Public records will show that, at that time, both black and white residents testified against the establishment. It was declared a public nuisance.

Next came the voluntary compliance of the black-supervised 7-Eleven Store at Princess and Henry streets. The store forego the sale of liquor before 11 a.m. and remove all fortified wine from its stock. The National Council on Alcoholism describes the market for fortified wines as overwhelmingly late stage alcoholics and young people, and the association's negotiating premise was the Gallo winery's announcement to end the sales of its fortified wines (Thunderbird, Night Train) in alcohol-dependent areas. Both parties compromised in that 7-Eleven still sells, after a brief interruption, single cans of beer.

The civic association received no citizen complaints for an action that was otherwise hailed as precedent-setting. (Gazette Packet, 12/20/89.) When considering remedies, the civic association gave careful thought to the Gallo company's accompanying statement that, "The skid row alcoholism problem will never be solved until state and local regulatory agencies enforce existing laws which forbid retailers from selling alcoholic beverages of any kind to habitual drunkards and obviously intoxicated persons." (Washington Post 9/22/89.)

On July 10, having refused requests from both the city and the civic association for voluntary restrictions on liquor sales, B&E owner James Bailey and association President Jesse Jennings squared off before the Alcohol Beverage Control Board. The hearing examiner ruled in the neighborhood's favor. The conclusion, unlike the white-owned E&J which was permanently closed, was to fine Mr. Bailey, to temporarily suspend his liquor license, and permanently remove fortified wine from the store's inventory.

As president, I have an ethical obligation to see to it that both black and white business owners are treated equally. To the editors, I can only say that a business or liquor license has regulations attached. The police department reports over 600-plus calls for service to B&E Discount Grocery over the last 16 months. Clearly, a demonstrated problem exists there. Given this fact, is it fair to suggest that one establishment should receive preferential treatment at the expense of another? Profit is the bottom line that drives all business but, as one politician already has testified, a liquor license is not a right; it is a privilege. At present, E&J's is out of business; 7-Eleven wants a "level playing field," and Mr. Bailey is positioning himself for an Oct. 1 appeal.

The ethnic history of this neighborhood has always been mixed; so the civic association operates by consensus. Our geographical boundaries extend from Columbus to West streets and Cameron to Wythe streets. We are particularly concerned with those issues brought to us by residents living closest to a given problem. To the disappointment of some, the 1990 census indicates, especially when considered census block by census block, that the ethnic ratios are changing. The numbers suggest that overall neighborhood opinion is not dominated by any particular ethnic group.

Sarah Becker
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