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Activism sprouts in New Albany

Civic movements in the city are rare

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Nine shirts flapped on a clothesline strung at the corner of Spring Street and Hauss Square next to the City-County Building in New Albany last Thursday.

About two dozen casually dressed people clustered around the shirts -- symbols, some of them said, of a City Council that was misguided in its opposition to state-ordered budget cuts proposed by Mayor James Garner.

The group that had erected the clothesline and planned the demonstration -- waving signs that said "Vision," "Progress" and "Clean up New Albany" -- calls itself Constituency for Progress.

Modest though it was, the demonstration appears to be the latest indication of a new spirit of civic activism in New Albany -- a spirit that some political observers say has been rare in the past.

In recent months citizens have come together to oppose development of a new subdivision of affordable homes on Linden Street, while others have called repeatedly for city government to appoint an official to enforce city codes.

At city council meetings, some residents have voiced concern over what they see as uncontrolled city spending, while others have said they worry that poorly planned budget cuts will slow vital projects.

Steve Price, a member of the city council who has been both supported and opposed by activists at recent meetings, said public involvement in New Albany is clearly on the rise.

"I think it's because we're at a crossroads," he said, with the cost of municipal projects and services increasing rapidly and less money available to pay for them.

Last Thursday's demonstration, said Randy Smith, one of the organizers, wasn't intended to support one political faction or another in New Albany's often-divided city government. It was intended to support progressive government.

Constituency for Progress has no formal membership rolls, he said. But he added that about 50 people took part in last week's demonstration and he knows of at least 50 others who are sympathetic to the group's efforts.

The group sees the mayor's budget plan as "crucial," Smith said, "because we have seen no other solution."

Without a carefully thought-out plan for the state-ordered \$2.8 million budget cut, Smith and others said, city government might have to lay off employees and cut badly needed services.

The organization also wanted to demonstrate that there is "a constituency to press for progressive ideas" in New Albany, said Jeff Gillenwater, another organizer.

Longtime political leaders said it is rare for residents to come together for the long term to influence public policy.

"I have seen groups come together for a single issue," said Larry Kochert, a member of the City Council for more than 20 years.

Based on his experience, Kochert said, he is somewhat skeptical about the longevity of the Constituency for Progress. But for now, he said, it is visible and vocal.

Councilman Mark Seabrook said he welcomes such public involvement in city government.

But it's crucial, Seabrook said, that members of the public become well-informed about city issues before making judgments.

He said he disagreed with the Constituency for Progress's view of the proposed budget cut, because he felt part of it -- a proposed \$500,000 loan to city government from the city's quasi-independent sewer utility -- might put the utility's finances at risk.

At Thursday night's council meeting, the budget plan supported by the citizens' group was approved, except for the loan from the sewer utility. Garner said he will meet with council members to keep discussing where city government can obtain the additional \$500,000 he thinks it will need to keep operating through 2005.

Jim and Tabitha Sprigler were among those at the rain-drenched gathering at the City-County Building Thursday. Like several others there, they said they got involved after moving to New Albany recently.

Looking for a way to meet people and get involved in their new community, the young couple began attending meetings of the East Spring Street Neighborhood Association.

After participating in that organization's discussions of city issues, the Spriglers began attending some meetings of the City Council, and that got them more concerned and more involved in the many issues confronting local government.

"We would like to not see the city shutting down departments and services because of the budget crisis," said Jim Sprigler, 25, because that would disrupt efforts to clean up the trash and dilapidated rental housing in the East Spring Street area that are major neighborhood concerns.

Tabitha Sprigler, 22, said she worries that the budget crisis could lead city government to cut back or delay plans for Scribner Place, a downtown development intended to include a YMCA and municipal swimming complex.

She and several others said they think it's crucial for the city to build Scribner Place as a step toward reviving downtown.

Roger Baylor, who was among those at the demonstration and also maintains a popular Web log focused on New Albany government, said he believes Constituency for Progress and its first rally resulted from a convergence of demographic, technological and political forces.

City residents who long have been concerned about public policy have been empowered to gather and express their views, Baylor and others said, by the creation of at least four Internet-based Web logs and forums in New Albany within the past year that encourage communication and interaction.

Randy Smith's Destinations Booksellers, which opened on Spring Street in the fall, also is becoming a community gathering place, and several neighborhood associations have gained strength recently.

All that is creating a community willing to speak out on the issues, Baylor and others said.

Valla Ann Bolovschak, owner of the Admiral Bicknell Inn, a bed and breakfast in New Albany, is one resident who has spoken about public issues at several recent meetings of the city council.

She said she attributes the increased public interest in policy to an intensified concern about city problems and a broader knowledge of the issues, in part through the taped broadcast of council meetings on cable television.

Price said he also believes the recent cable broadcasts of council meetings has stirred some of the public involvement. He added that said he's pleased the public is engaged.

"It's very good," he said.

Some of the organizers of last Thursday's demonstration agree.

"This is only the beginning," Gillenwater said.

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