

Guest Editorial

Doing the right thing

by Robert Tobin, Executive Director, Boys and Girls Club of Auburn

In life, as in love, we all know that it's the little things that make a big difference.

Every business person has learned that while good luck and bright ideas are important, it is sustained effort over time that will determine a company's success.

At home, every parent has learned that their ongoing interaction with their children does more to define the quality of their family relationships than the shine on the last toy or destination of their most recent vacation.

And it is at least once every year that we are reminded that the warmth of our Valentine's Day celebration was decided by our ability to extend the celebration to every other day of the year.

As with people, so it goes with communities which they constitute.

Every town has many good ideas for addressing its needs. The test is not in recognizing these problems or even in identifying their solutions. Rather the challenge lies in generating the continual attention, effort and other resources required to maintain momentum in the face of obstacles and opposition that any change generates.

In the past, it often fell to major patron to sponsor a new civic project. Increasingly, public agencies or private foundations took on the benefactor role. In either case, local communities were denied both the opportunity for input and the responsibility for the outcome. In delegating to others the funding role we lost our influence in the decision-making process.

One great advantage of our modern era is relatively recent recognition that those who derive benefits of any civic endeavor must also shoulder its burdens. The emerging necessity for prior consent now requires that a new project have not only the initial investment but also the long-term commitment required to assure its success. But with the realism of a more clear-eyed view also comes the realizations if someone else is not going to do it all for us, then each of us will have to do our part.

Fortunately, this lesson also came with another insight: we must not only do the right thing but we must also do the thing right. A case in point was Auburn's recent effort to generate funds for parks and recreation: although not

seeking a significant monetary amount from individual tax payers, the proposal was rejected by the voters for not securing their prior consent.

A case in the opposite direction is the formation of Auburn's Boys & Girls Club. Founded as an outgrowth of concern expressed at an impromptu town hall meeting at La Bou's Cafe around Valentine's Day three years ago, the project methodically cultivated a ground swell of community interests. It was local residents — not paid professionals — who researched and responded to their neighbors' questions about how our community could balance efficiency and effectiveness in fostering development opportunities that prepare today's youth for tomorrow's world. They took pains to assure that this initiative would complement and not compete with existing programs, and consulted with other communities to avoid "reinventing the wheel."

The completion of the Club's first full year of operation speaks for itself. Hundreds of kids have had contact with the program, most from the town's highest-need area in the vicinity of Auburn Greens. The Sheriff's Office correlated an immediate reduction in the area's crime rate upon the Club's opening. And there is now an extensive effort underway to bring the Club's youth-centered program development strategy into Auburn's downtown area, giving local teenagers an alternative to boredom and its often-troublesome consequences.

An equally significant achievement is the Club's success in generating nearly \$120,000 in 1995 to fully cover its operating costs. While every sector of the community has been called upon to contribute to its endeavor, government support has constituted just 5% of its revenues. Much of this support came from monthly or quarterly pledges by community residents and business which range from \$1 per day to \$1000 per month, creating a renewable source of support for the Club's future activities.

Another valued source of support has been a variety of small fundraising events which have added up to big bucks for Auburn's kids. A golf tournament sponsored

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by Auburn Toyota, a Christmas office party fund-raiser by local attorney Patrick Little, a benefit by Auburn's Harley Davidson Motorcycle Club, a sports auction at Gold Country Rotary Club sponsored by KAHN radio station, proceeds from dinner sales at Roundtable Pizza and the Sizzler Restaurant and from chiropractic services performed by Dr. Eric Parks — the list is as varied as the results are impressive.

Another noteworthy strategy is the local Taco Bell's challenge to the community. The local franchise has doubled its annual donation to the Club by making an additional \$10,000 gift on the condition that other businesses make gifts which combine to that same amount, thereby matching the two-fold increase in the Club's United Way grant (recently raised to \$20,000).

We are not generally accustomed to this sort of multiple-approach fundraising strategy, but it represents the next century's model for creating community services that are truly community-based. Such low cost fundraising methods have high yield in terms of building local residents' sense of responsibility for their community's endeavors. By increasing its accountability to those who benefit from its existence, these methods improve a project's endurance and broadens its impact.

Even in these difficult economic times, Roundtable Pizza manager, Mike Drust has found that "We can make a big difference without anyone being hurt financially if everyone does a little bit." In that belief, Drust — a Boys Club alumnus himself — has launched the Club's latest fundraising venture.

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