

# Cleveland Park hears from candidates

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Current Correspondent

The sanctuary at the Cleveland Park Congregational Church overflowed last week as an estimated 175 residents came out to hear from the 14 candidates in the neighborhood's first contested citizens association election.

Candidates, residents and current officers of the Cleveland Park Citizens Association said they were pleased with both the high attendance and the civility of most of the attendees at the three-hour forum last Tuesday, which followed a summer of animosity after the association postponed the election to Sept. 29 from early June.

"I think that it's a sign that CPCA and the neighborhood has already won," said Jeff Davis, who is running for association president on the "Reform" slate.

Just before the scheduled June election, Davis and other Reform leaders had organized a campaign to recruit more residents into the citizens association and announced their intention to run, saying they felt the existing organization did not properly represent the neighborhood on development issues.

The resulting influx of new members and candidates caused the association to delay its elections. According to association president George Idelson, the group needed time to prepare for the logistics of a contested race and give residents a chance to learn more about the candidates. Reform leaders accused Idelson, who is not seeking re-election, of trying to stifle opposition.

At last week's candidate forum, Davis said that while he still objects to the delay, he has a new appreciation for the outcome of the post-

ponement.

"It's a terrible abuse of power, it's not consistent with the bylaws," he said. "But now we're in a good place ... I think it's all for the good."

Davis added that the success of the membership drive and the contested election have guaranteed the success of many of the key issues his slate shares with its "Unity" slate opponents, including improved communication and broader representation. The new interest in the citizens association has also generated more general excitement about the organization, he said.

"This is a very big change in terms of neighborhood dynamics," said resident Joe Howell, who attended the forum. In the past, the association has "had some interesting meetings, but basically it's been a very small group of citizens, most of whom are pretty hard-core no-growth."

Howell said he hasn't decided where to cast his vote, but both groups at the forum impressed him, and he expects either to be better than the association's present leadership.

But the Reform and Unity slates — with seven members each — have also emphasized the differences between them.

The Reform candidates emphasize a "bottom-up" leadership style where the association serves only to reflect the will of its members, without the officers serving as the main decision-makers. They said their top policy priority would be to revitalize the neighborhood's ailing Connecticut Avenue commercial strip, recognizing that the business models that made it successful in the past may no longer be viable.

Meanwhile, John Chelen, the Unity slate's presidential candidate,

offered pointed criticisms about the Reform slate. He said their oversimplification of development issues would open up new rifts in the community — "'nuance' has almost become a dirty word," he said — and that the group's "negativity" about the neighborhood's retail potential could scare off potential tenants.

The slates are also split over the contentious Giant supermarket and accompanying housing development at Wisconsin Avenue and Newark Street. The origins of the Reform slate can be traced to that topic: "The substantial majority in favor of the Giant were not represented [by the citizens association], and we were trying to represent that view," Davis said.

At the forum, Reform candidates reiterated their longstanding conviction that there is no middle ground on the Giant issue between support and opposition — that a "yes, but" stance is effectively a vote of opposition for the project. Unity candidates, meanwhile, said such an approach would be far too general for such a large-scale development.

"This polarization is pushed by demonizing certain kinds of answers," Chelen said. "We have to be aware that the loud voice of the majority doesn't harm the legitimate interests of the minority."

Both slates clearly want to change the way the association does business, Idelson said, and he cautioned the victors to make their changes with care.

"I certainly think that modern communication is a good idea, and I think more membership is a heck of a good idea, but I think these things could have been done without destruction in its wake," he said in

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an interview. "In Cleveland Park, we modernize our houses all the time. We never tear them down first to modernize them. ... It's easy to tear a house down, harder to build it back up."

Idelson endorsed the Unity slate, saying he believes its members are more likely to be civil. The Unity candidates are "non-polarizing; they don't have the people who really, I felt, created the somewhat-abrasive environment for discussion, made it difficult to really deal with the issues when they were being debated," he said.

While voters can choose candidates from different slates for each officer position, Idelson and other observers have questioned how well the opponents would be able to work together if a mix is elected.

Though most of the discourse at the forum was polite, both slates had to fend off some pointed questions from audience members over issues the candidates said later they did not feel were relevant.

At one point, Chelen was questioned about recording a telephone conversation with Davis, and Davis was then questioned about discussing the recording.

The Reform candidate for treasurer, Mike Rosella, was questioned about posts he made on the Cleveland Park listserv in which he advocated protesting speed humps by honking while driving over them, a statement he defended at the forum.

"The honking-horn concept has worked very well in other jurisdictions to have speed humps removed," Rosella said at the forum. "It's just as outreaching to neighbors as getting speed humps installed."

Rosella could not be reached for further comment. Davis said he hoped the community would move past old listserv comments but added that honking on neighborhood streets "is not a productive thing to recommend."

"These 'gotcha' moments and planned confrontations ... at this point are not really productive," Davis said. "Frankly, we have really wanted to focus on getting past the divisive issues and start talking to

## Candidates

These are the candidates running for officer positions on the Cleveland Park Citizens Association and brief descriptions of each based on statements they gave at last week's forum. The election will be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Cleveland Park Congregational Church. More information about the candidates is available on the association's Web site, [clevelandparkisus.org](http://clevelandparkisus.org).

### Reform Slate

**Jeff Davis, president:** Organized community support in favor of the Giant development and a new listserv. Helped lead citizens association membership drive.

**Anne Large, first vice president:** Married to the owner of three Connecticut Avenue businesses in Cleveland Park, giving her a special, useful perspective about retail.

**Collins Roth, second vice president:** Chairs a neighborhood committee that reaches out to the National Child Research Center preschool. Hopes to use online polling to hear from residents who can't attend meetings.

**Gabe Fineman, recording secretary:** Wrote summaries of advisory neighborhood commission meetings that offer more color than official minutes and would do the same for the association. Would also provide downloadable podcasts of association meetings.

**John Thoren, assistant recording secretary:** Is a board member of the Cleveland Park Club. Stressed a need to reach out to more members of the community. Echoed Roth's sentiments about the values of online voting.

**Genie Grohman, corresponding secretary:** Serves as president of the Chesterfield Cooperative. Decided to run for office after the citizens association election was postponed. Hopes to review association bylaws.

**Mike Rosella, treasurer:** Professionally installs telephone towers, giving him experience working with a "not in my backyard" mentality. Has made controversial comments on the community listserv, such as advising neighbors to protest speed humps by honking.

### Unity Slate

**John Chelen, president:** Has helped many organizations reach compromises. Helped make the newly created listserv part of the citizens association. Helped neighbors organize to call for improvements to 30th Street.

**Susie Taylor, first vice president:** Raised children in Cleveland Park, but they will soon move out, which lets her understand the perspectives of young families as well as empty nesters.

**Barry Winer, second vice president:** Desert Storm Air Force veteran and relative newcomer to Cleveland Park, having arrived in 2006. Criticized the vitriol on the listserv, which he said is a better platform for learning about the neighborhood than for arguing about it.

**Ann Hamilton, recording secretary:** Previously involved in national and international issues and intends to apply the skills she developed there to the local level. Would promptly post association minutes to the listserv.

**Sean Mullen, assistant recording secretary:** Understands residential and commercial issues from living in a condo along Connecticut Avenue. As the youngest candidate, he would bring a unique perspective. (Mullen was unable to attend the candidate forum, so Winer read his written statement.)

**Ruth Caplan, corresponding secretary:** Was president of the Cleveland Park Book Club. Worked on a national campaign that organized communities to reach compromises, and decided to bring her experience from that to her neighborhood to try to restore calm after the Giant disagreements.

**Clark Madigan, treasurer:** Active in the Tregaron Conservancy. Hopes to encourage neighbors to meet face-to-face and be more civil. Hopes to conduct an audit of the neighborhood's fire hydrants that assesses their condition and calls for necessary repairs.

— Brady Hoit

the community in a more civil way. And I think it was clear at the meet-

ing that not all parts of the meeting are ready to do that."