

Signaling a new era for Cleveland Park

VIEWPOINT

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Two events that occurred in Cleveland Park last week signal the end of one era and the beginning of another.

The first, Bruce Beckner's Viewpoint in The Current ["Clearing up the record in Cleveland Park," Sept. 16], exemplifies the past and the worst qualities of life in Cleveland Park — a mean-spirited tirade of falsehoods, smears and innuendoes designed to batter his neighbors into submission. Traditionally, the battered would respond in kind, dredging up vitriol and misdeeds from Mr. Beckner's past involvement with neighborhood issues. Accusations and defenses would fly, dirty laundry would be aired, and the city would shake its collective head at our self-immolation.

In contrast, the second event was a gathering of more than 150 Cleveland Park neighbors for the Cleveland Park Citizens Association's candidates forum to hear 14 association members, organized into two slates of seven, vie for election to serve the neighborhood. This event marked both the association's first contested election in many years and the largest gathering of members in recent memory. All 14 candidates have pledged to bring the association into a new era of transparency, communication, participation and purpose. They have pledged to work with each other and for the community whether they win or lose the election. Starry-eyed we may be, but we have big plans to help lead Cleveland Park's revitalization.

Although we are all lucky to live in Cleveland Park, our intimate neighborhood faces serious issues. We must stay vigilant about crime, commercial vacancies, rats and pests, traffic and parking. These are serious issues, and we need leaders who are serious about solving them. The time for smears, sniping and bickering is over. If neighbors will make a serious contribution to addressing these issues, we need and welcome their help. But if all they can contribute is nastiness and vitriol, the time for that is past; they should step aside and let Cleveland Park get down to serious work.

What can and should we do? We can begin by capitalizing on the new momentum and energy at the Cleveland Park Citizens Association by forming

focused committees on safety, traffic, parking, commerce and other issues. Instead of relying on an overworked and overextended executive board to do everything, we can diffuse the work throughout the organization, gather the vast expertise that resides in our neighborhood or within easy reach, and start generating the solutions to the neighborhood's problems. Ideas and discussion are critical; a small group of officers should not decide issues that concern all of us.

Next, we should institutionalize all the wonderful communications advances the candidates have already made and promised. This work includes amending the bylaws to remove anything that hinders communication, limits voting opportunities, or excludes people or ideas. The membership list must be published (with due concern taken for privacy) so members can identify and speak with one another. Absentee or online voting must be permitted so that members who are away or busy on a particular day can still have a voice. The association listserv must be preserved and enlarged, e-mail addresses gathered, the Web site enhanced and online capabilities enabled, including member registration, dues payment and issues-based polling.

Perhaps most importantly, the association must help neighbors relate to one another again. Online communication has a useful place, but it is no substitute for face-to-face interactions. We need to spend time getting to know each other in the meaningful ways neighbors used to know one another. In the past two months at three events, the Reform Slate of candidates shared drinks, ice cream and burgers along with conversation, and we also supported local merchants. The citizens association also has to connect with neighborhood institutions like schools, and groups like the Cleveland Park Historical Society and Friends of the Cleveland Park Neighborhood Library. Social and neighborhood-building events can and will help us recapture a strong sense of shared values and community purpose.

The great reward of my work on the Giant has been new and deep bonds with many warm, hard-working and devoted neighbors. I look forward to making that kind of connection with other neighbors in a new era of civil dialogue in Cleveland Park. We need to end the era of bitterness and strife that has plagued us.

Jeff Davis is a candidate for Cleveland Park Citizens Association president.