



Tybee Neighbors: Long on ideas and projects, short on hierarchy

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BY BRAD SWOPE

The Tybee Neighborhood Association, better known as Tybee Neighbors, is a successful grassroots organization, except for the "organization" part. Actually, it's very well-organized, but non-hierarchical: "There are no officers or offices and no dues or fees," explains the group's Website, tybeeneighbors.com. When the group meets monthly, however, "you can bring cookies," said John Major, one of its most active members.

It formed in 2005 when a number of island residents found they shared concerns that the island's brisk development pace--in particular, a wave of multi-family, high-density condominiums--was inconsistent with the island's Master Plan and threatened its "quality of life." Since then, Tybee Neighbors has kept busy sponsoring public forums and gathering information on an array of political and economic issues, from council terms to tourism and even stormwater management.

"We are touching a lot of people in different ways," said Major's wife, Sandy.

Dave Postle, another key member, saw joining the group as an alternative to merely griping about things.

"If the private citizens want to help the island, they should grab a shovel and dig."

The linked issues of development and high property taxes were recurrent themes when a handful of Tybee Neighbors--the Majors, Freda Rutherford, Lou Off, and Postle and his wife Sandi--met Feb. 16 for a group interview at the Majors' home on South Campbell Avenue.

A group-sponsored Town Hall meeting on property taxes drew an overflow crowd last August. But Tybee Neighbors isn't limiting itself in what topics it tackles--in February, for example, it conducted an online survey on whether Tybee City Council members should be elected for staggered four-year terms instead of the two-year terms now in effect. Any change would be up the voters themselves, and the issue could be on the ballot in November.

Group members insist they're not anti-development--the Majors, after all, just built their home, overlooking Chimney Creek, in 2003. And Tybee Neighbors doesn't endorse candidates for elective office, though it

sponsored a well-attended City Council candidates forum in 2005. Individual members often split, they say, on any number of issues.

"They seem to come from all walks of life and political persuasions," said Tybee City Manager Diane Schleicher, who has found the group's various forums and research helpful since joining the city last May.

Sandy Major said: "We're trying to supplement council's planning roles in studying issues."

Her group hasn't taken any unified position on a proposed skateboarding park--a project opposed by another group, Tybee Island Residents and Property Owners Association. But Tybee Neighbors has applauded the city's \$7.2 million purchase last year of River's End Campground as consistent with the group's own policy of preserving green space. "That was a hard decision but a good one," John Major said.

The members who met Feb. 16 also share a concern that rising property values, spurred on by development of prime beachfront and marshfront land, are pushing taxes so high that longtime, even lifelong, residents will have to leave in cases where the Stephens-Day homestead exemption law doesn't control their tax bills. "For some people, taxes have doubled in the last five years," Off said.

Rising taxes also beset island businesses that already struggle to make it in a seasonal, tourism-based economy. "We're very concerned about losing our businesses (that are) being taxed out of business," Rutherford said.

Off said, "The biggest disaster for Tybee is when someone kicks out a restaurant to build condos."

Group members also worry that, with buildable vacant land on the island dwindling, "teardowns" of sometimes-historic structures to make way for new development will accelerate. "The battle is shifting," Rutherford said.

Some find much of the island's charm in its scarcity of high-volume fast-food franchises and chain stores. Still, Tybee Neighbors is looking for ways to help the island's home-grown businesses become less vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations. "A normal (Tybee) restaurant is going to make money three months of the year," Off said.

Seeking inspiration for their own backyard, Tybee Neighbors invited Cam Jordan, director of community development in Fitzgerald, Ga., to address its Feb. 1 meeting on his South Georgia town's successful economic improvement plans.

The group also hopes to bolster year-round tourism with one of its latest projects, a "Tybee Tour" video it is producing that would quickly familiarize island visitors with its historical, environmental and cultural attractions.

"What's a Tybee Neighbor?"

Excerpts from the group's Website:

-- "We came together over 18 months ago because of our shared concern about the problems resulting from over-development of Tybee Island . . .

-- "Recently we have become increasingly aware that development and speculation have significantly contributed to our property taxes accelerating to the point that continuing to live and own property on the island has become a challenge for many of our longtime residents . . .

-- "The Tybee Neighborhood Association came together to support our elected officials, to preserve the quality of life on the island, and to do what we can to make sure that the wishes of our citizens, as expressed in our Master Plan and ordinances, are followed by our government . . .

-- "Often it seems that 'property rights' are defined as the right to sell property at the same amount our neighbor sold his for, or as the right to build in accordance with the developer's best economic advantage. This approach can ignore the long-lasting impact that such development may have on the future of the island. We think that property rights should also consider the perspective of those property owners who want to make Tybee Island their home--now and in the future . . .

-- "Developers and speculators may never profit from these people. But these property owners have rights too."

Tybee Neighbors meets the first Thursday of each month. For more information, visit the Website at tybeeneighbors.com.

