

Getting Together: West Harrison forms neighborhood association

By Alex Malecki

WEST HARRISON - When County Legislator Robert Astorino hung up his "Ask Astorino" sign and spent a few hours on the streets of Silver Lake last year, one sentiment that came across loud and clear was that West Harrison has been neglected.

Complaints on a street corner, however, go nowhere. Thanks to the efforts of five citizens, area residents now have a voice with

the West Harrison Neighborhood Association (WHNA).

"We wanted them to take us seriously," WHNA Vice President Lori Wilson said of town officials on Saturday.

The origins of the organization lie in a dinner held by the five last summer to share their frustrations over what was happening in the northern end of town - illegal apartments, over-crowding, parking, traffic and the state of the

West Harrison business district. At some point the thought of forming a civic association came up.

By the fall, Secretary Angela Amodeo said, it was "OK, we're meeting."

A board was soon formed with Fred Sciliano as president, Wilson as vice president, Jeffrey La Grotte as treasurer and Amodeo as secretary. Trustees included Geraldine Barbagallo, Lisa Faillace-

Sciliano, Mario Gallo, Gregg Rosenberg and Charles Russo. Their timing could not have been better as the Town Board came to the West Harrison firehouse in November to announce its streetscape and Passidomo Park renovation projects.

"Everybody thinks that was our first meeting, but it wasn't," Amodeo said.

Instead, the WHNA used that gathering as a kickoff for

interested citizens to become more involved. The first general meeting was held later that month, with 66 people in attendance.

Since then the WHNA has held more meetings with guest speakers such as Police Chief David Hall, Councilman Joseph Cannella and Code Enforcement Officer Edward DiBuono. It has

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also formed seven committees in the areas of Planning, Architecture & Zoning; Traffic, Safety & Crime; Public Works, Utilities & Beautification; Parks & Recreation; Membership and communications; Senior Citizens and Fundraising.

"I was amazed at the amount of seniors who came to our first meeting and wanted to get involved," Sciliano said.

Amodeo said the seniors are angling for a daily-supervised program in West Harrison like other communities have. Superintendent of Recreation Ronald Belmont is reportedly looking into a pilot program to begin at the end of summer camp.

For his part, Sciliano is tired of people saying West Harrison has been left out. Amodeo noted that a lot of times people's attitude is to expect the WHNA board to do all the work. The point of the neighborhood associations, however, is to get the community working together.

When Hall spoke at the association's first meeting, for example, residents gave him a laundry list of concerns. The chief actually returned for the next meeting to report on what the department had done, such as make Woodside Avenue one-way and put up speed monitors.

"Direct results of people coming to the meeting and informing him," Amodeo said.

Given the tightness of the community, however, filing complaints remains a problem, as residents are often reluctant to submit the formal complaints that the

town requires to before taking action. To combat that, the board tries to get multiple signatures on a complaint so no one person has to answer for it.

"We're starting to get some things done," Sciliano remarked.

The president said he has already seen evidence that the town is cracking down on illegal apartments, an issue that has a lot of ramifications on quality of life. Five alone were found on Ann Street behind the Mintzer Center recently.

Aside from the illegality, Sciliano said such apartments are a safety issue. A 28-year volunteer firefighter and former chief, Sciliano noted that basement fires are among the worst to fight because there is often nowhere for smoke and heat to go.

Central to the survival of the WHNA is the fact that it was not formed around any one issue. Rather, the concerns it deals with all center around quality of life, something all residents should be concerned with. The president said councilmen would often stop by meetings just to see what is going on.

"I think a lot of people come because they really love this town, they love Silver Lake," Wilson said.

Now WHNA's 110-signed members want to make it better.

The next meeting of the West Harrison Neighborhood Association will take place on May 19 at 7:30 p.m. at the West Harrison Firehouse. For more information, call President Fred Sciliano at (914) 428-4969 or Vice President Lori Wilson at (914) 831-8232.