



The Historian

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Birth of a City

Leisure World residents studied their status as an unincorporated community several times since 1964 when the first residents moved in. In 1971, seven years after the first residents moved in, the City of Laguna Beach annexed territory on Leisure World's western border. Although Laguna Beach didn't pursue annexation of Leisure World, residents were forced to consider their future governance options.

In 1979, Leisure World's Golden Rain Foundation (GRF) hired a consulting firm and special legal counsel to prepare a report on possibilities for local governance. The options, including maintaining the status quo, were studied and various boundaries were investigated. One year later, an ad hoc committee of GRF recommended that Leisure World remain unincorporated until it was ready to incorporate on its own or until it was threatened with annexation by an adjacent city.

In 1981, Leisure World leaders believed that threat was imminent and GRF submitted an application to the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) for incorporation. The subsequent financial feasibility study concluded that Leisure World, by itself, did not have a sufficient revenue base to support incorporation.

In 1982, the City of Irvine considered annexing commercial areas along Moulton Parkway that would have split Leisure World in half. In response to this threat, GRF submitted to LAFCO the signatures of 12,000 voters in support of the incorporation of Leisure World. However, another financial feasibility study concluded that incorporation was not financially feasible because there were not enough adjacent shopping centers to generate the necessary sales tax revenue required to support a city. At that time, many of the commercial developments that now exist – the Home Depot Shopping Center and Town Centre – were not even in the planning stages.

Saddleback City Petition

In 1987, soon after the incorporation of the City of Mission Viejo, a group of developers and builders filed an incorporation petition with LAFCO to create a 15,122-acre Saddleback City of some 77,000 residents that would have included El Toro, Lake Forest, North El Toro, Laguna Hills and Agean Hills—but not Leisure World. This application got ahead of the concurrent application to form a Laguna Hills-Leisure World city, because it was filed by the Santa Ana Mountains County Water District. No petition signatures were submitted.

Incorporation of Laguna Hills

In 1988, Laguna Hills community leaders, with some support from Leisure World residents, soundly defeated Measure A, which would have incorporated Saddleback City. This made it possible for Laguna Hills and Leisure World to move forward with a joint vote on incorporation.

Dave Blodgett was appointed to lead the incorporation effort in Leisure World by GRF President Al Hanson. The financial analysis of the proposed city was highly favorable, especially with the large sales tax revenue that would be generated by the Laguna Hills Mall. When the June 6, 1989 election date was set, proponents ran a full-page ad in the Leisure World News (*LW News*) containing the names of 775 residents who supported incorporation. This support, in part, came as a result of news from the County of Orange that municipal services



Dave Blodgett was an active participant in the effort to incorporate with Laguna Hills and the successful incorporation of Laguna Woods. This article is based on a paper he wrote.

MUSINGS

Honoree of Month

Our congratulations to **Jim Shaffer**, our Laguna Woods Honoree for February and **Arthur N. Moss**, our Honoree for March. We are grateful to the Video Club, whose members videotape the ceremony.

We would like to welcome **Images by Dwayne** as one of our sponsors of the Honoree of the Month Program. Inga Futtrup is the photographer who has so expertly captured the images of our Honorees of the Month for the last seven years.

Save the Date

Scheduled for Sunday, March 22, 2009, the Society's Annual Dinner will be a gala event to celebrate the 10th Birthday of our city, Laguna Woods. The invitation is included on pages 3 and 4.

Claire Still 1918 - 2008

Claire Still, a retired History of Medicine Librarian at Stanford University, moved to Leisure World in 1983. Within weeks she became the first person officially appointed as the Archivist of the Historical Society. Claire was elected to the Society's Board in 1984, and served as our President from 1987 through 1991.



Bob Ring



Claire Still

Claire was named Leisure Worlorder of the Month for December 1992. She was also the first president of the Laguna Hills branch of American Association of University Women. Three years ago, Claire moved to Las Palmas. She passed away in December 2008 and was kind enough to leave us a bequest.

Nominations for the Board

The Society's Board is seeking people who can:

- Help us collect history and modernize our archives;
- Enhance our public profile through outreach;
- Provide expertise in fundraising or membership; or
- Assist with developing our genealogy program

Applications for the Board of Directors are available at the Society's Office. The deadline for submissions is March 6th. For more information, call (949) 206-0150.

Jan Brayley 2008 Citizen of the Year



Jan Brayley

Janet L. Brayley was honored as the Laguna Woods Citizen of the Year by the South Orange County Regional Chambers of Commerce at its Laguna Woods State of the City Breakfast on January 30th.

Brayley became involved with the City in 2000 after responding to a request in the local newspaper for volunteers to help at City Hall. She has been there ever since, volunteering a four-hour shift each week to answer the phone, help with mailings and perform other office tasks. She served as a member of the City's Community Service Committee for many years and as a member, and later as chair, of the Committee's Arts & Culture Subcommittee. Jan was instrumental in gaining City Council approval to become a member of the Chamber and in development of the Shop Laguna Woods campaign. Jan chaired the Community Services Committee for the past two years, and was recently appointed by the City Council to chair the City's new Public Safety Committee.

Jan has lived in California all of her life. Raised in Long Beach, she graduated from Long Beach Wilson High School and attended Long Beach City College. She worked for Douglas Aircraft Company for a few years, then became a stay-at-home mom in 1959.

Jan volunteered in schools as a member of the Parent-Teacher Association and as a teacher's aide. She was a member of the Westminster Chorale for several years, and actively worked for the building of the Westminster's Rose Center Theatre which opened in 2007.

Jan has three married sons, nine grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. She worked part-time for the Westminster School District until her husband died in 1986 and then worked full time in the School District's Accounting Office. She retired in 1997 and moved to Laguna Woods in 1999.

Jan Brayley continues to epitomize the unselfish, giving spirit of many residents in this community who have volunteered to help the City become a successful agency that provides quality services and programs to those who live or work in its confines.



THE CITY OF LAGUNA WOODS
CELEBRATES 10 YEARS

Laguna Woods, with respect for the past, looking to the future

THE CITY OF LAGUNA WOODS
CELEBRATES 10 YEARS



SPONSORED BY THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF LAGUNA WOODS

SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2009
5 P.M.

CLUBHOUSE FIVE
24262 PUNTA ALTA
LAGUNA WOODS, CA 92637

CHOICE OF CHICKEN MARSALA, PRIME RIB,
SALMON FILLET, OR VEGETARIAN.
HORS D'OEUVRES, SALAD, DESSERT, AND WINE INCLUDED.

NO HOST BAR

\$30 PER PERSON

BLACK TIE OPTIONAL

RSVP BY MARCH 17, 2009

THE MEREDITH HUBBARD TRIO
"BROADWAY BIRTHDAY" MUSICAL REVUE



CITY OF LAGUNA WOODS CELEBRATES 10 YEARS
SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2009 • 5 P.M.

I/WE WILL ATTEND THE ANNIVERSARY DINNER. PLEASE RESERVE _____
TICKETS AT \$30 EACH. ENCLOSED IS MY CHECK FOR \$ _____
MADE PAYABLE TO THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF LAGUNA WOODS.

NAME

ENTRÉE *



_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

* ENTREE CHOICES: CHICKEN MARSALA, PRIME RIB, SALMON FILLET, VEGETARIAN

I/WE CANNOT ATTEND BUT WANT TO SUPPORT ANNIVERSARY DINNER.
ENCLOSED IS MY CHECK FOR \$ _____ MADE PAYABLE TO THE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF LAGUNA WOODS.
P.O. Box 2220, LAGUNA WOODS, CA 92654

NAME: _____ PHONE: _____

ADDRESS: _____

Cityhood (from Page 1)

would soon be reduced in unincorporated areas due to the rising cost of providing them.

This effort to incorporate failed by a slim margin of 284 votes. The 68% of the 8,071 voters outside of Leisure World were defeated by the 67% of the 9,615 voters in Leisure World who opposed becoming part of the City of Laguna Hills. Paradoxically, had the election been successful, two residents of Leisure World, Herbert Schwarz and Leon Bosch, would have been elected to the Laguna Hills City Council.

The defeat, which occurred on June 6, 1989, resulted in some lasting animosity toward Leisure World residents. On March 5, 1991, Laguna Hills successfully incorporated on its own with 86% of their residents voting in favor of cityhood. On December 20, 1991, Laguna Hills officially became a city.

Analysis of 1989 Results

In 2002, Ross Andel, Ph.D. and Phoebe S. Liebig, Ph.D. (Andel & Liebig), while they were at the University of Southern California, wrote a paper titled, “*The City of Laguna Woods: A Case of Senior Power in Local Politics.*” Their study concluded that “This appeal initially received a more favorable answer from the Leisure World residents, in part because of an increased willingness to consider incorporation, which came as a result of an Orange County announcement that services such as police and trash collection would be limited in unincorporated areas. Nevertheless, concerns about lifestyle changes that were presumed to be part of the incorporation, led Leisure World residents to oppose incorporation by a large margin of nearly two to one. Andel & Liebig also surmised that, “resistance to annexation, may well support opinions that older people resist change.”

Blodgett agreed with Andel & Liebig that the defeat was primarily due to residents’ concerns that Leisure World would lose its status as a gate-guarded senior community, non-residents would overrun the recreational facilities, and taxes would increase as a result of the addition of another layer of government. Blodgett adds that the political action committee (PAC) formed to oppose incorporation raised more funds than the two pro-city PACs combined.

In 1991, GRF’s Government and Public Relations Committee (GPRC) studied the economic viability of an independent city of Leisure World but took no action.

At a luncheon in Leisure World in 1996, Fifth District Supervisor Marian Bergeson stated that the county’s bankruptcy provided additional incentive for the



In 1989, Leisure World residents took to the street in front of Gate 5 in an attempt to convince motorists to vote “no” on incorporating with Laguna Hills.

Courtesy Leisure World News

county to get out of the business of providing municipal services to unincorporated areas. She urged the community to investigate incorporation.

Successful Campaign for Incorporation—1996 - 1999

GRF then retained a firm called MuniFinancial to analyze Leisure World’s governance options. On June 19, 1997, Mike Bannan of MuniFinancial presented a Governance Report which showed that a newly incorporated city of Leisure World would be financially feasible. Bannan recommended that GRF pursue further study of incorporation by immediately preparing a Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis.

On July 21, 1997, GRF asked the residents of Leisure World to support incorporation. Leisure World leaders approached the El Toro Water District (ETWD) and asked them to act on behalf of the Leisure World community by submitting an application to LAFCO for incorporation. The incorporation proponents asked ETWD to submit a resolution of application to start the LAFCO process while signatures of at least 25% of the registered voters were gathered. As an affected agency, on July 24, 1997, the ETWD’s Board of Directors agreed by a 4 to 1 vote. ETWD’s resolution was worded in a way that allowed the application to be withdrawn if a sufficient number of petitions were gathered ahead of schedule.

Matt Magidson, President of GRF, together with Cynthia Chyba, a member of the United Mutual Board, and Bob Ring, President of Third Mutual, initiated the petition process as the “chief petitioners.” Ring assumed the responsibility for gathering the signatures needed to file the petition. The official petition for cityhood was inserted into the July 24, 1997 issue of

the *LW News*. Bert Hack, then Chair of GRF's GPRC, used the *LW News* and TV Channel 6 to encourage residents to sign the petition for cityhood.

Revenue Neutrality

An important factor complicating the incorporation of new cities in California is something called "revenue neutrality." Amended to a 1985 law in 1992, revenue neutrality, according to Glenn Robinson of the Carmel Valley Forum, "caused incorporations across California to grind to a virtual halt. Prior to the adoption of revenue neutrality, California averaged about four incorporations per year, which was natural given the rapid growth in the state." Since the adoption of revenue neutrality, the number of new incorporations has dropped significantly to less than one per year.

The revenue neutrality law states that incorporations "should result in a similar exchange of both revenue and responsibility for service delivery among the county, the proposed city, and other subject agencies." Robinson contends that, "In reality, it has had a stifling effect on self-government in California. Instead of self-determination being the principle underlying incorporation, the welfare of county budgets has become the overriding factor."

Hack frequently explained that "time was of the essence" in filing a petition with LAFCO in order to keep sales tax revenue from the Home Depot Center (scheduled to open in November 1997) from being included in the revenue neutrality calculation.

About four weeks later, on September 2, 1997, petitions containing 4,276 signatures were forwarded to the Registrar of Voters who found that 3,878 were valid. Subsequently, ETWD rescinded its resolution.

The draft fiscal analysis was submitted to LAFCO on January 20, 1998. GRF paid a total of \$137,000 to move the process through LAFCO. The cost of the 39-page financial analysis prepared by MuniFinancial was \$25,000; the Registrar of Voters charged \$8,500 to validate petition signatures; the County billed GRF \$17,500 for a map of the proposed city; GRF reimbursed LAFCO \$10,000 for its expenses and another \$10,000 for its independent fiscal analysis; map revisions and surveyor's fees cost \$30,000; and the special election cost \$30,000.

By February 5, 1998, the chief petitioners and the negotiators for the County agreed that revenue neutrality could be achieved if the new city would agree to pay the county \$405,045 each year for the first seven years after incorporation. Bert Hack, Bob Ring and Leslie Keane, Leisure World's Public Information Specialist,



Three chief petitioners: Third Mutual President Bob Ring, GRF Secretary Cynthia Chyba, and GRF President Matt Magidson. They gathered on February 2, 1999 to honor Magidson who relocated to the East Coast for health reasons. Courtesy Leisure World News

negotiated the agreement with the County. The Orange County Board of Supervisors approved the agreement at their regular meeting on May 19, 1998.

By June 4, 1998, GRF and the chief petitioners had reached an agreement with the City of Laguna Hills on the boundaries of the proposed city. The key issue was that Laguna Hills would retain the existing roadway on Ridge Route and the new city would claim the right-of-way on the south side of the street. Eventually, this area would be converted into a dog park in 2003 and a linear park in 2009.

That same month the chief petitioners asked their fellow residents who were registered voters to select three possible names for the proposed city. While numerous light-hearted names were submitted, the most popular were: Laguna Heights, Laguna Verde, and Laguna Woods.

LAFCO Public Hearing

On June 22, 1998, LAFCO held a hearing in Leisure World's Clubhouse 3. After receiving five hours of public comments, two financial analyses, and a recommendation for approval from LAFCO's Executive Officer Dana M. Smith and Assistant Executive Officer Joyce Crosthwaite, they addressed incorporation.

A motion to postpone a decision made by Commission Chairman and Laguna Hills Councilman Randal Bressette and seconded by Mayor Peter Herzog of Lake Forest was ultimately defeated. A motion to accept the LAFCO staff findings and recommendations was made by LAFCO's Vice-Chairman and Fourth District Orange County Supervisor, Charles V. Smith. It passed 5 to 0, with Herzog abstaining. LAFCO's staff suggested that the election be held on

March 2, 1999. That date was approved by the Orange County Board of Supervisors on September 15, 1998, together with their approval that the voters could choose either Laguna Verde or Laguna Woods as the city's name. Laguna Heights was to be the third choice but it was withdrawn after the Laguna Heights development in Laguna Niguel objected to its use. The other ballot decisions were to elect the five members of the city council and decide whether council members would be elected at-large or by district. Obviously all of these decisions were contingent upon the majority of the votes being in favor of cityhood.

Leisure World Residents for Cityhood



Betty Hohweisner

Dave Blodgett, one of the leaders of the 1989 Laguna Hills campaign, founded a group known as Leisure World Residents for Cityhood (LWRFC). Betty Hohweisner, a well-known and highly respected community leader accepted the presidency, Helen Lyon and Columba Kaufman became vice-presidents, Joan Nugent, Secretary and Jerry Werner,

Treasurer. Craig Charlton headed the Speakers' Bureau, and Burns Nugent, Jack Sylvester and Dave Blodgett acted as advisors. Blodgett did most of the fundraising for LWRFC.

LWRFC retained the services of campaign consultants, Frank Adams and Sharon Buffa of The Greensburg Group. LWRFC agreed to structure their campaign strategy based on a random survey of 400 Leisure World voters conducted by Professor V. R. Smith of the University of California in October 1998.

The key finding of the study was the response to the standard question: "If the election were held today, would you most likely vote for or against cityhood?" The response was 36% for, 42% against, and 22% undecided. Smith opined that any well-financed and organized campaign would defeat incorporation.

Leisure World Residents Against Incorporation (LWRAI)

LWRAI was originally founded in 1989 to stop incorporation with Laguna Hills. Helen Ensweiler was one of the charter members. When the cityhood issue surfaced again as a result of the MuniFinancial report, Ensweiler decided to take the reins of LWRAI when its old leadership decided to switch sides. Murray Silverman

assumed the role of treasurer. They were authorized to use the \$7,000 that remained in the treasury from 1989's Laguna Hills campaign.

Fact Finders and REACH

Fact Finders was a group headed by Sol Mann that included Marty Rhodes, Jack Rouman and Milton Rubin. Rubin and Rhodes appeared at a LWRAI rally in February 1999. Rhodes said that he was undecided about cityhood but proceeded to challenge what he called a "wish list" of the proponents' benefits, while Rubin disputed the accuracy of MuniFinancial's projections. Their presentation, together with the *LW News* coverage on February 11, 1999, presented a serious threat to the pro-cityhood efforts.

A neutral group, REACH (Residents for Evaluating and Analyzing Cityhood Here), was headed by Bill Selwyn, Henry Eilbirt, Lynne Ianniello, John Fuller, Irving Goldberg, Jean MacAuley, Milton Ray and Herb Schwartz.

REACH published and distributed a six-page white paper, titled "Report on Cityhood," which purported to present both sides of the debate but, on balance, leaned toward the "no risk" posture of neutrality. LWRAI used the paper as an anti-cityhood tool.

All of the organizations involved in the campaign consulted frequently with Leslie Keane. The nature of her position required her to provide factual information to all interested persons without bias as to their personally held positions on the issues.

George McInnis

On June 29, 1998, George McInnis and the Leisure World's Community Civic Association presented the first of four informational seminars that focused on the roles of three major components of city government: the City Council; the City Attorney; and the City Manager. The fourth session dealt with how these functions operate in the critical first year of a new city. The seminars were moderated by Len Wood, an experienced city manager and training consultant. They featured experienced professionals and provided residents with detailed information.

In December 1998, McInnis, who was a GRF Director and Chair of GRF's GPRC, announced that GRF had "established a cityhood liaison group to act as a facilitator, to assist the community in getting to know and understand the issues, and to have an opportunity



Helen Ensweiler

to see and hear the candidates.” During the cityhood campaign, McInnis communicated with people on both sides of the issues in an effort to ensure that they based their decisions on facts.

Airport Concerns

On January 5, 1999, GRF voted 7 to 1 in favor of incorporation. At that meeting and throughout the rest of the campaign, Bert Hack made and championed the most influential argument for incorporation: Leisure World would be the community most impacted by the plans for a commercial airport at the site of the Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro (MCAS El Toro). Hack was an advocate of using incorporation to gain a seat on the El Toro Reuse Planning Authority (ETRPA). In Hack’s words, “We need to stand up and fight; we need to sit on ETRPA.”

ETRPA was created to represent the South Orange County cities and to recommend to the Orange County Board of Supervisors and the U.S. Department of the Navy the “highest and best use” for MCAS El Toro. In 1998, in response to Orange County’s plan for a commercial airport, the City of Irvine and the other South County Cities prepared an alternative non-airport reuse plan for MCAS El Toro known as the “Millennium Plan.” This plan was the predecessor to today’s Great Park Plan.

City Council Candidates

The filing period for registered voters to pick up petitions indicating their intentions to run for a seat on the proposed city council opened on November 9, 1998. Sixteen persons were certified, including Mary Balcom, Jackie Carey, Richard Faulhaber, Bert Hack, Victor Kay, Harry A. Lindsay, Dorothy M. May, Helen Mills-Lindsay, Charles E. Nahas, Brenda Ross, Bea Hassel Rogatz, Gordon E. Rudolph, Dave Schlenker, Ann M. Snider, Jim Thorpe and Harold Woods. Faulhaber, Rogatz and Woods were opposed to cityhood.

The Campaign

Opponents of cityhood worked hard to communicate with residents. They ran a full-page ad in the January 7, 1999 edition of the *LW News* arguing that Leisure World was not an unincorporated island and that it “could not be forced to be annexed into the [pro-



George McInnis

posed] city of Aliso Viejo.” They also believed that cityhood would result in increased taxes.

In January and February 1999, LWRFC countered with quarter-page headline only ads that shouted, “Tell the County Where to Put Their Airport!”; “Only Cities Can Stop the Airport!”; “Cityhood Will Triple Our Police Protection. Foil the Cat Burglar!”; “Absolutely No New Taxes!”; “Stop the Extension of Santa Maria Avenue!”; and “Are You Ready to Adopt a Yuppie Family? Say No to Aliso Viejo.”

Also in February, LWRFC had a full-page ad featuring Marian Bergeson, together with the six reasons listed above as the justification for cityhood. Added to that was a headline ad that read: “Our City will be financed by recapturing existing sales and property taxes and motor vehicle fees.” and “Absolutely No New Taxes!” On February 18, 1999, Irvine City Councilman Larry Agran was featured in LWRFC’s “Six Reasons” full-page ad that was supplemented with another quarter-page ad that read “Protect Our Walls, Our Homes, Our Future.” and “Cityhood Will Produce an Annual \$1 Million Tax Surplus.”

The LWRAI countered with a full-page ad in February, listing seven reasons to vote against incorporation. They were: “Cityhood will not stop an airport at El Toro; new taxes are inevitable; added police protection is an illusion; outside interests are funding the pro-city cause hoping to garner future contracts; big jury settlements could bankrupt the city; the new city will



Mayor Pro-Tem Bert Hack, in April 1999, standing in front of the storefront in the Willow Tree Shopping Center that would become the first Laguna Woods City Hall. In 2002, City Hall moved to its current location at 24264 El Toro Road.
Courtesy Los Angeles Times

have to pay \$2.8 million as part of the Revenue Neutrality Agreement; and city ordinances and eminent domain could definitely upstage our convivial lifestyle.”

Throughout the campaign both sides distributed flyers and conducted numerous discussions and meetings. LWRFC used direct mail, one of which featured a brief statement by Norman Murray, the first Mayor of Mission Viejo, and a list of incorporation benefits. There were also several public debates.

On January 21, 1999, the *LW News* presented a 5-week series posing specific questions given to the pro and anti-city groups. The first question was: “Explain how you believe Leisure World will or will not have more influence in fighting the commercialization of El Toro Marine Corp Air Station (MCAS) if it becomes a city?” This was followed, on successive weeks by: “How do you think becoming a city will affect the Leisure World life style?”; “What do you see as the future of Leisure World if voters reject incorporation on March 2?”; “List of the advantages and disadvantages of Leisure World becoming a city.”; and the final question, “Why it is important to vote?”

On February 28, 1999, three days before the election, the proponents’ full-page ad featured State Senator Bill Morrow and endorsements from more than 450 residents. The opponents countered with a half-page ad titled, “DON’T BE FOOLED,” listing all of the objections stated in the previous week’s ad except for the statement that cityhood would not stop the airport.

Lighter Moments

Every campaign has its lighter moments. One of these was related to LWRFC’s campaign button. Blodgett designed a simple campaign button which was approved by the committee. An enthusiastic committee member located a button manufacturer who said that he could provide the buttons at a very low price in quantities of 2,000. The member placed the order and then reported to the committee, “. . . and they only cost thirty-five cents. That’s \$70!”

After a moment of stunned silence, Blodgett said, “If you check your arithmetic, I believe you spent \$700, not \$70. Not to worry. All you have to do is sell 350 at \$2 each to recover the investment.”

Six months later the volunteer announced, “I have just sold the 350th button!”

The committee responded with a warm round of applause. More than 1,000 surplus buttons were donated to the cityhood campaign committee of Aliso Viejo.

On July 30, 1998, Comedy Central Network (CCN), the



This campaign button was the subject of one of the cityhood campaign’s lighter moments.

producers of “The Daily Show,” aired a satirical 3½ minute news segment on Leisure World’s incorporation attempt titled, “Grandfatherland.”

The spoof portrayed Bert Hack as the dictator of the potential city who would stop at nothing to rule Leisure World. It suggested that he might pilfer pieces of Aliso Viejo to further his “mad plan.”

Helen Ensweiler (cast as a “freedom fighter”) and Carmen Valle, one of the leaders of the Aliso Viejo cityhood campaign, are pitted against Hack. Valle expresses grave concern that the Aliso Viejo golf course might be a target for “Grandfatherland’s” expansion. Fortunately for LWRFC, CCN was not available on Leisure World’s cable system. Hack, Ensweiler and Valle were clearly duped by CCN.

Election Results

A few minutes after 10 p.m. on March 2, 1999, Laguna Woods entered the history books as the 32nd city in Orange County and the only city in the United States where the majority of residents live in a gated senior community. The results were far from overwhelming. Cityhood prevailed by only 342 votes of the 10,638 ballots cast.

At-large versus district elections were selected by 57% of the ballots cast, while 65% of ballots chose Laguna Woods over Laguna Verde.

The voters elected Jim Thorpe (5,048 votes), Bert Hack (4,649 votes), Ann Snider (4,044 votes), Brenda Ross (3,092 votes) and Victor Kay (2,718 votes) as the first members of the City Council.

Laguna Woods officially became a city on March 24,



Jim Thorpe



Bert Hack



Ann Snider



Brenda Ross



Victor Kay

The March 4th LW News shouted, “New city’s new council hits the decks running!”

1999, when the five newly-elected city council members were sworn in by Orange County Superior Court Judge Francisco F. Firmat. The ceremony was held in Ficklin Hall at the Laguna Country United Methodist Church. A 12-page commemorative program was published to record this historic event.

At the City Council meeting following the ceremony, Jim Thorpe was elected Mayor by the City Council and Leslie Keane was hired as the City Manager. On the same day, Keane celebrated her birthday.

Analysis of Airport Concerns

The most important factor influencing incorporation, as noted in Anandel & Liebig’s study, was the existence of a clear and present threat posed by the possibility of a commercial airport at the MCAS El Toro. A pronounced shift in public mood toward incorporation occurred when Leisure World residents began to recognize that their ability to oppose the airport was impeded by the community’s status as an unincorporated community. Anandel & Liebig concluded that, “the airport, by presenting an immediate threat to community well-being, seemed to instigate a sense of cohesiveness and an explicit reason for political mobilization. The inability to act was most apparent to Leisure World residents in 1998 when they could not stop Orange County policymakers from using their taxes to support the pro-airport campaign.”

Another important factor was increasing awareness of the potential adverse health effects of living in close proximity to an airport. In his letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1999, Bert Hack reported on a 1993 study by Meecham and Shaw conducted near Los Angeles International Airport. The results indicated that living near that airport could be correlated to a two-year loss in life expectancy among seniors 74 years of age and older. The factors that contributed to the decline in life expectancy were excessive noise levels and air pollution.

Although concerns about the airport may not appear “senior-specific,” some of the consequences of living near an airport may seem more threatening to older persons. Anandel & Liebig suggested that “while younger persons may also have health concerns about being located near an airport, they may consider the economic and transportation benefits of such a facility as more important.” Anandel & Liebig went on to say that, “as worries of the Leisure World residents concerning the noise and pollution associated with the airport grew, so did the success of pro-city activists.”

Analysis of Resident Participation

As the election outcome reveals, pro-city activists succeeded in conveying the advantages of incorporation, although the results were far from overwhelming. Anandel & Liebig opined that “the relatively close outcome of the election and the fact that nearly one-third of registered voters did not participate suggest that seniors may be hesitant to take on a major change, even when their welfare may be threatened. It may be that other relevant issues besides fighting the airport and the innate resistance to change among seniors prevented Leisure World seniors from gaining a stronger impetus toward incorporation.”

Blodgett concluded that Rossmoor Towers provided the winning margin of 342 votes because of the leadership provided by philanthropist, Jack Sylvester, and Mutual 50 President, Tom Beckwith. While Bob Ring acknowledges the leadership of Sylvester and Beckwith, he believes that the Towers overwhelming support was a direct result of their support for long-time Towers resident, Brenda Ross. Ross is and was recognized nationally as an advocate for older adults and a variety of aging issues. Likewise, Ring also suggests that the margin of victory was achieved as a result of the support that pro-city candidates received from their friends and family.

What Can Wake the Sleeping Giant?

Andel & Liebig examined the formation of the City of Laguna Woods as an example of the potential for senior voters to implement their desires at the ballot box (*senior power*) in local politics. They concluded that *senior power* “may be a reality in today’s aging politics... however, [it] may be contingent on several factors.” The following is excerpted from their study.

“First, a major critical issue has to be at stake for seniors to exhibit their political potential. While seniors tend to engage in passive forms of political participation... and withdraw from more energy-demanding activities such as campaigning and contacting politicians, they may show high levels of active political activism when their welfare is threatened.

Second, a political issue is more likely to provoke effective senior activism if it affects a homogeneous senior group rather than American seniors in general. Even major national political events such as presidential elections or important issues such as Social Security and Medicare may not support the senior power model. However, a specific local issue threatening to affect a well-defined group of seniors may give rise to an effective local response as it did in the case of Laguna Woods.

Finally, the ‘able old’ may be especially likely to demonstrate senior political power.”

Andel & Liebig point out that “a relatively high income, education, and high levels of activity assert that Laguna Woods residents fits the definition of the ‘able old.’ They also cite findings that show that self-government and control over one’s future are important for retirement community residents.” Specifically, they write that “Political activism in Laguna Woods corroborates that the ‘able old’ may represent a group that can effectively respond to unfavorable political developments.

The relatively narrow margin of victory in the 1999 city election and less than 70 percent voting turnout suggest that not all seniors become politically involved when their welfare is directly contested by political circumstances. Nevertheless, the support for opposing the proposed El Toro airport among Leisure World residents demonstrates that seniors can unite and mobilize against threats to their health, lifestyle, and well-being.”

The Future

“While the initial effort to create a city in Leisure World was inspired by airport opposition, the new city’s existence has enabled Laguna Woods residents



This picture is typical of those published by the media who insisted on emphasizing the age of Leisure World residents. Some articles insisted that the proposed city would be “age restricted.” Courtesy Los Angeles Times

to get involved in actions that could result in unprecedented benefits for seniors. Since the city is almost exclusively occupied by seniors, senior-related services such as the proposed golf cart paths for non-drivers are always among the main items on the city’s agenda. This unique opportunity to focus on aging issues could make this California city an appealing model for other senior communities. Laguna Woods appears to represent a case of gray power in local politics, with special circumstances playing a major role in senior mobilization. Whether it will remain the only ‘senior city’ or whether other senior communities will respond to political crises in a similar way remains to be seen.”

This story was taken, in part, from a paper recently written by C. David Blodgett, as well as articles that appeared in the *Leisure World News*. Reprints of Blodgett’s paper are available by calling the Historical Society at (949) 206-0150.

Much of the analysis contained in this story came from “*The City of Laguna Woods: A Case of Senior Power in Local Politics*” which was written by Ross Andel, Ph.D. and Phoebe S. Liebig, Ph.D., while they were at the University of Southern California. It originally appeared in a 2002 edition of the *Research on Aging Journal* published by SAGE Publications.

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Editor - Bob Ring

Opinions expressed by authors in *The Historian* do not necessarily reflect those of the Historical Society of Laguna Woods.