Citizen participation in local government is waning

By CAIN CHAMBERLIN
Cape May Star and Wave

Plato once said, "One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors" – a philosophical statement that raises the question as to why there is such a lack of involvement in local government today.

Covering municipal meetings for the newspaper on a regular basis, the Star and Wave can't help but notice the number of empty seats, whether it is in Cape May City, West Cape May, Cape May Point or Lower Township. Voter registration and turnout during elections have at times shown a decline in participation over the years as well.

Cape May City Mayor Edward Mahaney said when speaking with other council members, board members and mayors in the area, they also mention the low attendance at local meetings. Mahaney served on city council from 1995 to 2003 and from 2008 to the present. He said he noticed a much higher attendance at council meetings in the late 90s and from then it has steadily diminished. He has several theories on the matter, such as the decrease in the year round population of Cape May City since the 90s.

"Before I joined council, there was an influx of retired people in Cape May who wanted to get involved with the community," he said.

He said since 2000, most of the people in that group have moved, passed away or have health conditions preventing them from coming to meetings. Mahaney believes the working age group of today doesn't have time in their schedules for civic involvement.

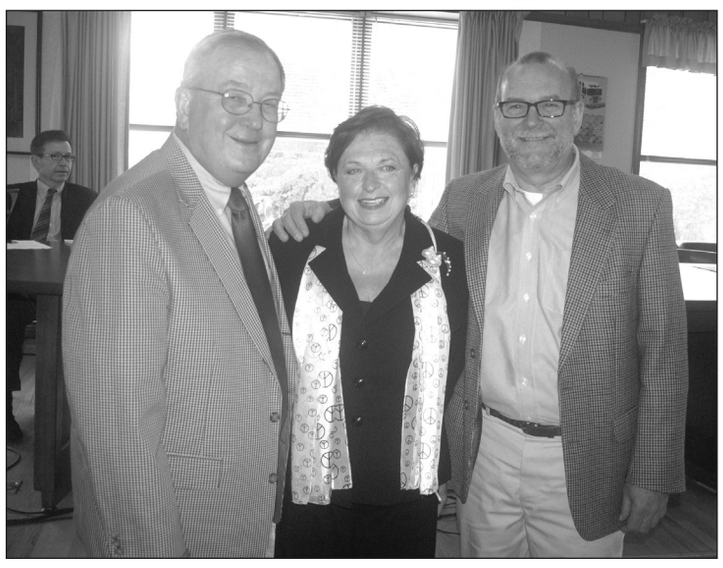
"It's unfortunate, but there are people who work long hours and need to get home to their kids, so they don't have a chance to come to meetings," he said. "I ask people to serve on a committee all the time, but they can't because of a lack of spare time."

He said he believes the apparent apathy toward government is based on the people's priorities.

Mahaney said the winter months obviously have an impact on attendance, because a high number of residents leave the city for five to six months to stay at their second home or to vacation.

He said the only time there is high attendance at a meeting is when a controversial issue arises, such as a major tax increase. Mahaney said city meetings used to be televised, but it never increased local participation in government. Lower Township Mayor Mike Beck, however, said he was surprised by the number of people who have tuned in since 2006, when the township first began televising council meetings. Beck said he purchased the camera himself, after the township had already passed its budget. He recorded the meetings on DVD and submitted them to Lower Cape May Regional High School to be broadcast on television.

"It's had a huge positive impact. If it's not aired one week after a meeting, people call and ask about it," he said.



Christopher South/Cape May Star and Wave

Above, the newest governing body in the Star and Wave coverage area – the Cape May Point Board of Commissioners; left to right are top vote getter and Mayor George "Skip" Stanger, Deputy Mayor Anita vanHeeswyk, and Commissioner Bob Moffatt.

Beck said even though there are those who watch the meetings on television, there is still an extreme lack of participation in government.

"It's everywhere – citizen participation is down," he said. "We take for granted a lot of the liberties we have and that leads to a big problem."

Beck said as elected officials, council is a group of representatives for the people. However, it's hard to represent someone who rarely gives their opinion. He said by simply writing a letter to the editor, emailing a councilmember or coming to a meeting and taking a stand, people can and will make a difference in their community.

"It's not my government and it's certainly not council's government – it's the people's," Beck said.

Beck said he understands there are people working more than one job or have such a busy schedule it prevents them from coming to meetings, but there are important issues discussed and voted upon at council meetings that affect those same people in the community. He said the younger generation of today seems to be a less participatory one in terms of government and he hopes that changes.

"At the end of the road, there needs to be a collective soul searching," he said. "We all need to think outside of our own little worlds."

Beck said one positive, however, is the fact Lower Township has always had a strong voter turnout. Mahaney said Cape May's voting numbers have decreased because of the shrinking year-round population and some lack in participation. He said in the late 80s and early 90s, the voter turnout in the municipal election was 60 percent or higher, sometimes reaching 75 percent. He said now, the turnout is roughly between 45 and 50 percent.

Beck's running mate for the November election, Norris Clark, said in order to gain the attention of the public, someone has to raise an issue and let people know what's in it for them or how it will affect them and their community.

"People are busier than ever before, working," Clark said. "They may say 'I want to do something about that but I don't have time' – they need to be cheered on and encouraged."

He said politicians must raise the call and keep reminding people to stay engaged. Clark said government cannot perform without the help of the people. He believes there are some elected officials who would unfortunately rather not have a lot of people coming to meetings.

"There's lots of questions, and that takes time, and sometimes the questions are not comfortable ones," he said. "But elected officials have to remember they're servants and not lords."

Clark said as he and Beck run for election and speak with residents of Lower Township, they are encouraging people to come to meetings and be more involved in local government. He said council and the people need to find out what's best for the community and work on it together.

West Cape May Commissioner Ramsey Geyer, who will not be running for reelection when his term expires, said there have often been times during his term of office when an issue is being discussed during the work session for several meetings but no one is there to hear it. When the matter is finally voted on, people start to ask questions and offer their opinions when it's too late.

"You don't just say 'I want to make a change' and then not do anything," he said. "If people in West Cape May want to make a change, they have to step up to the plate."

Former Cape May Point Mayor Carl Schupp, served on the board for the past 12 years, leaving office after the May 8 election. He said sometimes there are 10 to 20 people at the regular meetings and can remember times when there was standing room only. He said even though attendance is down at most meetings in municipalities, there are still so many other avenues for people to get the information without actually being there like the internet, newspapers and emailing board members. He said some people would rather not come home from work and then go to a 7 p.m. meeting, so they wait until a later time to get the information that was covered.

"If it's a critical issue, you will see the room packed with people," he said. "But some don't want to go out that late at night and just wait to find out what happened."

Schupp said participation in government might be down, but community involvement in Cape May Point has always been positive. He said there are many volunteers in the borough that serve on local groups and commissions, help with beach clean ups and maintain Lily Lake and the surrounding gardens in the Point.

Cape May Point Deputy Mayor Anita vanHeeswyck said elected officials are the "trustees of the people's tax dollars" and the people should always know how it's being spent. She said the voter turnout for the borough has been relatively strong in past years but still participation is down. After being reelected last week, vanHeeswyck hopes to turn things around and encourage residents to become involved.

"We're open to any way we can get the board out there," she said. "It's disheartening when people have complaints and don't come to meetings."

VanHeeswyck said she invites residents to come to board meetings but she has had little success filling the seats. She said because most residents are gone during the winter, the board tries to stay away from voting on potentially controversial issues that time of year.

Beck said there is a much higher number of year round residents in Lower Township than on Cape Island, which is why he would like to see more involvement at every meeting. He said the only way to make a good, efficient government is for everyone to work together.

"The more people that have their hands in government, the better government it is," Beck said.

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PBA

Continued from page A1

were included in the projected $200,000 savings. Campbell said the PBA's proposal provide some immediate savings and some long term savings.

Campbell said the PBA was told the city wanted to wait for Gov. Chris Christie's tool kit to be authorized, and he believed the city would step up and finish negotiations based on that. However, they got a little tired of waiting.

"The last meeting we had was Feb. 17. The city knew back at Easter the guys were getting frustrated. We had a meeting scheduled as recently as this Thursday," Campbell said.

Campbell said the city finally came back with a complete proposal for the first time on May 9. He said the PBA reviewed the city's proposal and sent it back to the city for a response on May 10, with the expectation there would be a meeting between the two sides on Thursday, May 10.

"They cancelled that meeting for unknown reasons and so we put on this informational picket as example of our frustration. Had there been a meeting (Thursday) we might have held off on picket," Campbell said.

Campbell said the PBA held a picket on Friday, May 11, and just half the day Saturday so as not to interfere with the Lower Cape May Regional High School Prom. The picketers were back out Sunday and Monday. Campbell said the PBA advised City Manager Bruce MacLeod that the informational pickets would continue every day until there is an agreement between the PBA and the city. He said the PBA might hold similar pickets at City Hall and at the Washington Street Mall. He said

"I really don't know what the problem is. It's just a lack communication at this point," Campbell said.

Campbell said it's unusual to be without a contract for 18 months, and it appears that by the time this one is settled, the PBA and the city will be back in contract negotiations in about 21 months. Campbell said the contract was scheduled to be discussed in closed session at Tuesday's city council meeting. He said the PBA attorney sent their response to the city's proposal and the union is waiting for the city to respond.

"We said we would not picket if we were in negotiations and taking steps to finalize the contract, but really, the ball is in their court," Campbell said.

City Solicitor Anthony Monzo said a statement from the city regarding the PBA contract was being prepared for Tuesday, May 15. That statement was not received prior to the Star and Wave deadline for publication.

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Friday 5/18 Matt Hayden solo piano 5:30-10:30
Saturday 5/19 Lisa Tee solo piano 5:30-11:30
Sunday 5/20 Frank Vanella – solo piano 5:30-10:30
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**BATTLESHIP A PG-13 11:30, 2:00, 4:35, 7:10, 9:45
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THE AVENGERS IN 3D A PG-13 1:00, 4:00, 7:00, 10:00
THE AVENGERS IN 3D B PG-13 1:30, 4:30, 7:30
(10:30 FRI & SAT ONLY)
**DARK SHADOWS PG-13 11:40, 2:20, 4:55, 7:35, 10:10
**THE DICTATOR R 12:40, 2:40, 4:40, 7:50, 9:55
**WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN EXPECTING PG-13 12:10, 2:35 5:00, 7:25, 9:50
THE PIRATES! BAND OF MISFITS PG 11:35
THE LUCKY ONE PG-13 1:40
HUNGER GAMES PG-13 4:05, 7:05, 10:05
MEN IN BLACK 3D (FRI 5/25 12:01AM) PG-13

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TIDES
MAY 2012
Eastern Standard Time

	High A.M.	High P.M.	Low A.M.	Low P.M.
16	5:35	6:08	11:29	
17	6:22	6:49	12:12	12:11
18	7:06	7:27	12:57	12:50
19	7:47	8:04	1:40	1:27
20	8:27	8:40	2:20	2:04
21	9:06	9:16	2:59	2:39
22	9:45	9:52	3:37	3:15
23	10:23	10:28	4:14	3:52

Moon Phases
Full Moon, May 5
Last Quarter, May 12
New Moon, May 20
First Quarter, May 28
Perigee, May 5
Apogee, May 19