

San Diegans do their part | Griping about city's woes doesn't help, so they pitch in

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Al Radick cleaned up a park. Because, well, it needed it.

The place was a mess, thick with weeds and littered with fallen tree limbs.

At a meeting of the Mira Mesa Recreation Council, of which Radick is a member, he "pitched a fit" about the park's condition.

A city's Park & Recreation employee told Radick, sorry, not much could be done about it. Because of money, of course.

Another person piped up: "Why don't you organize a cleanup?"

So Radick did.

The 70-year-old retiree had no idea how to do it. He posted fliers, lobbied the Mira Mesa Town Council for help, called soccer and baseball coaches and miracle of miracles ...

More than 50 people showed up to clean Lopez Ridge Park last June. They worked for nearly eight hours and filled a huge trash bin. They spread mulch and planted trees, too.

"It just kind of worked," Radick said. "I'm not really sure how I did it."

Here's a switch:

People stopping with the complaining about the city's money woes and inability to provide some services.

And pitching in instead.

A number of people are not about to let a little thing like the city's huge pension fund deficit mess with their neighborhoods.

Such activism is hardly new. What seems to be changing is the scope and ambition of some projects. People are cleaning parks and painting city firehouses and attacking graffiti.

How Radick came to have this surge of volunteerism was a bit unusual. He was told by a doctor to lose weight, so he started walking around the park. He saw the mess, didn't like it and did something about it.

"It's not our local guys' fault," Radick said of the maintenance crew serving Mira Mesa. "They're getting their budgets cut. It comes from above."

Getting involved

There are a number of ways to volunteer. The city runs a program offering volunteer positions in just about every department. You can do everything from clerical work to staffing the city's graffiti hotline. More than 40,000 people volunteered in fiscal year 2004.

You can also get involved in local community groups' efforts to keep neighborhoods clean and safe. There are also volunteer agencies, such as Rebuilding San Diego Together.

Fred Zuckerman just wanted to help keep his Tierrasanta neighborhood in order by volunteering for the city's Neighborhood Code Compliance Department.

In that position, people help spot code violations, put the property owners on notice with the city and write warning letters.

But Zuckerman soon found himself wanting to do more. The city didn't have the time to get to all the problems, he found.

So he asked for more responsibility and the city gave it to him. It sends him on assignments on nights and weekends, times when the city just doesn't have the staff to do the job.

By day, Zuckerman, 48, is a mild-mannered computer programmer. By night, look out: He does surveillance. He takes photographs.

Complaints run the gamut, from barking dogs to people running car-repair businesses from their homes.

Not long ago, a resident complained about a church being run from a home. This was happening on Sunday mornings. Zuckerman got the call to check it out. He made a log on who showed up and passed it onto the city, which took it from there.

Zuckerman is sent to check these more minor complaints because the department doesn't have the resources to do so, said Ida Ford, the department's volunteer coordinator.

He's undergone training to handle the job, she noted.

"He's a big help."

A good addiction

Some people get hooked.

That would be Peggy Maloney, for one.

On a recent Saturday morning, she was cleaning up Genesee Avenue in Clairemont.

Because, well, it needed it.

She does this every Saturday because she can't bear to see the streets filthy. So she heads out at 5:30 in the morning.

"What's the point of complaining?" she said of the city's bind. "What good does it do?"

On this morning, she was sweaty, dirty, tired. "I've been in the bushes, as you can see."

She was carrying bags of trash, a giant piece of cardboard and some sort of big plastic thing.

She is 70. In addition to cleaning up streets daily -- she has seven routes around her Clairemont neighborhood -- she paints over graffiti and helps the homeless. She cleans canyons. She also helps a neighbor, who's 101 years old.

She tears down signs proclaiming, "Yard Sale."

"They're illegal," she snapped.

While cleaning up, she has found cell phones and credit cards and, on a recent day, a \$100 bill. She said she gave that away because she doesn't need the money.

People who complain about the city need to give it a rest, she said. "What about our responsibility to the city?" she said.

She had to stop a couple of times walking up Genesee. The hill is steep. But she soldiered on.

"I made the world better today. And I feel happy about that."

Do it yourself

Mike Davis plans to paint a firehouse.

Sorry to be redundant, but, well ... it could use it. The city's Fire Department can't afford to do it.

So look who's going to pony up for paintbrushes and gallons and gallons of Sherwin-Williams.

Davis.

And a merry band of volunteers.

"These guys help us. We wanted to help them. So we asked them, 'What do you need?' " said Davis, of how he came about the idea of painting Fire Station No. 38 in Mira Mesa.

He runs an organization called HEROES -- Hometown Efforts to Restore Our Endangered Society -- that helps people in need and assists in public improvement projects.

"I just believe in putting my energy into the community," Davis said.

The Mira Mesa station is not the only firehouse to get a fresh coat of paint. The nonprofit Rebuilding Together San Diego painted a firehouse in Barrio Logan last year.

The organization, an affiliate of a national organization that helps the disadvantaged and elderly repair their homes, had moved to the Logan Heights area and wanted to do something for the community, said Pamela Thorsch, the executive director.

She talked to local firefighters, who were bummed about their firehouse, about how it looked on the outside.

So her organization painted it.

It's something of a new trend, noted Brent Lindberg, building maintenance supervisor the city's Fire Department.

The department has to prioritize spending, he said, and operational demands get attention first. "A lot of the aesthetic work we just haven't been able to pursue," he said.

Bring out your junk

Carmen Blas organized a neighborhood cleanup in her Chollas View neighborhood recently.

She does this every couple of years. She feels for her neighbors, many of whom don't have transportation and can't haul their stuff to the dump.

So she calls the city, which runs a cleanup program. It rotates from neighborhood to neighborhood. People put out bulk items and the city picks it up.

But Blas, 61, was the key player. She had to get the word out. She and her granddaughter and her friend went door to door, handing out fliers, telling people about the event.

And, on a recent Saturday, it was easy to tell that, yes, she got the word out.

Along the streets was so much junk: washing machines, bikes, refrigerators, mattresses, a pingpong table, a gas grill, a car hood, a Christmas tree, lawn mowers, a camper shell, bathtubs, chairs ...

Her neighbor, Valentina Baker, brought out her junk. It's a great thing for the neighborhood, she said. "It needed it."

These cleanups don't work unless volunteers hustle to spread the message that the city is coming, said Nancy Lovell of the city's Environmental Services Department.

"They are absolutely essential," she said of the volunteers, noting that the city doesn't have the money or the manpower to go door to door.

If not, the cleanup can be a "complete flop." And that's hardly welcome, in these times. The city is paying its workers overtime to staff these cleanups.

And they, too, could be on the chopping block. The city is looking at ways to cut costs and this program is being studied.

Blas, who has lived in her home since 1974, does other things to help her neighborhood, as well. If she sees someone painting graffiti, she pulls out a whistle and blows it. Scares the kids away, she said, smiling.

"I'm always looking for something to do to help."