

What Kind of West Mt. Airy Neighbors Do You Want?

Marc Stier
President, West Mt. Airy Neighbors

West Mt. Airy Neighbors (WMAN) is just beginning our annual membership drive. This, year, our membership drive is more important than ever. The results of the membership drive will determine the kind of organization we will be in the next few years and beyond.

Over the last six years, WMAN has dramatically expanded its operations. We have twice expanded our staff, hiring our first Executive Director five years ago and then hiring our Community Organizer in January. In part because of our expanded staff, and in part because of the active effort of our volunteers, we have been much more aggressive and active in serving the community.

You can see the results of our efforts to guide development in every part of West Mt. Airy: a new Acme Supermarket; a new CVS at Lincoln Drive and Mt. Pleasant along with a long range plan for beautifying that important corner—a plan that will start to become a reality in the next few weeks; a new school / community playground at the Houston School; the historic designation of the Nugent and Presser homes on Johnson Street. We have stopped developments that would have damaged the fabric of our community. And we have helped neighbors consider and either approve or reject over twenty other requests for zoning changes in various parts of West Mt. Airy.

We have also been active in many other pursuit: preserving the transit system upon which we so rely by leading the fight both for our own train line, the R8, and for funding for SEPTA as a whole; supporting our schools through the joint WMAN-EMAN Schools Committee; and creating a Safety Network that has helped mobilize neighborhoods and the 14th District Police to fight criminal activity in many areas of West Mt. Airy.

Most of all we have gone far in developing what we call the democratic infrastructure of West Mt. Airy, our Neighborhood Network of block leaders and multi-block organizations. We have helped create three large multi-block organizations. As a result, our Neighborhood Network makes it possible for everyone in the community to learn about important developments in each neighborhood. And it also makes it possible for us to mobilize our blocks and neighborhoods in defense of their own concerns or those of the whole community.

Perhaps the most important new initiative of WMAN has been our effort to address, along with EMAN and Mt. Airy USA, the problems that afflict some of the less prosperous blocks in Mt. Airy. Many, but not all of these blocks are in the Southern part of Mt. Airy, on both the east and west sides. If you walk every block of West Mt. Airy, as I have done in the last few years, you will see that there are areas of distress in pretty much every section of our community. There are blocks or neighborhood where our residents, many of whom are elderly, cannot keep their houses in a good state of repair; where incomes are lower and unemployment is much higher than average for our community; where there are businesses that create a nuisance for residents; where crime rates are higher than average and drug dealing is common. WMAN has been

instrumental in creating a new organization, Mt. Area Leadership Council, that will work to address these issues, to the benefit of these neighborhoods and, ultimately, of Mt. Airy as a whole. With this initiative, we have finally recognized that we are all members of one community that will rise and fall together.

There is still much more to be done. About half of West Mt. Airy has no active block captain. We hope to find these block captains soon. With our partners West Central Germantown Neighbors and Pomona Cherokee Civic Council, we still have to manage the process of redevelopment for the Johnson Street properties. We are just now creating a committee to develop a policy for the conversion and expansion of outbuildings, such as garages, into offices or apartments. Thanks to our increasingly prosperous commercial areas, we have parking problems all over West Mt. Airy, on Carpenter Lane, at Emlen and Mt. Pleasant; at Lincoln Drive and Mt. Pleasant; and along Germantown Avenue. We are working step by step to deal with these parking issues. With a little luck, we may be able to make substantial improvements in most of these areas in the next few years. And, of course, we still have to figure out how better to coordinate the efforts of WMAN and EMAN without losing the ability respond to the particular needs of each part of Mt. Airy.

While volunteers still do most of our work, WMAN cannot operate at this level without the support of staff. And, in order to expand our staff, we have relied on grant money from both the state and private foundations. Each time we have received outside support, we have been able to hire new staff and expand our operations. But state and foundation money is hard to get over the long term. We can only sustain our new level of effort if we can raise enough money from within our own community. That means we must expand our membership and substantially increase annual giving to WMAN.

Six years ago, we made a bet that, if we used grant money to expand our operations, the community would appreciate the new vigor of WMAN and respond to it with more support. So far, our bet has paid off. In the last six years, our membership, and the amounts of money we receive from membership dues, has roughly doubled. Six years ago we had no annual giving program. Now we raise over \$10,000 through annual giving. Six years ago we had no major gift program. Now a few members of the community give us substantial sums each year to continue our work.

So we are getting there. But we need to expand our membership a bit more to insure that we can continue doing the work that is so important to our community. There are 16,000 households in West Mt. Airy. However, less than a 1000 households are members of WMAN. If we can add another 200 to 300 households to our membership roles, we will be in good financial shape for the immediate future.

I will be leaving the presidency of WMAN in a few weeks. I am proud of what WMAN has accomplished in the last six years, while served for three years as Vice President for Community Affairs and, for the last three years, as President. I leave with WMAN poised to continue its vigorous role in preserving and enhancing our community. But to accomplish that, we need your help. If you are a member, please renew your membership now and ask your friends to join as well. If your membership has lapsed, it is time to rejoin. And if you have never been a member, please look over all that we have done, and think about what this community would be like if we

did not exist. Ask yourself what would have happened to the value of your house if the Acme or R8 had closed or if historical treasures like the Johnson Street properties had been demolished? I think you will come to the obvious conclusion and join WMAN. Call us for a membership application at (215) 439-6022; email us at wman@wman.net or join online at www.wman.net.