Democracy and Diversity:

A theoretical argument based upon the historical experience of

the West Mt. Airy section of Philadelphia

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Democracy and Diversity[1]

THE OLDEST ARGUMENT IN POLITICAL THEORY

One of the oldest arguments in the history of political theory is that strong communities are only possible where people live a life in common. Thus to be a strong community, people must be more or less homogenous.

By a strong community, I mean one in which people are engaged in and involved with their community. In strong communities, common goods are more important than individual goods. In such communities people are knowledgeable about their common good and are willing to sacrifice individual goods to receive common goods. Strong communities have virtuous citizen who avidly take part in the political life of their community and support only those ideas and policies that truly benefit everyone.

At least in our contemporary circumstances, strong communities will also be democratic communities. Now by democracy I mean not just a form of government but a way of life, one in which everyone is knowledgeable and committed to the common good. In a democratic community talk about common affairs is central to everyone's life.

Communitarian political theorists hope to create and / or restore strong democratic communities. And implicit if not explicit in the work of many communitarian theorists is the old idea that strong community is impossible if its members are not more or less homogeneous. Homogeneity is important in strong communities for a number of reasons. A commitment to the common good is not possible if there are strong tensions about where the common good lies. Where there is dispute and contention, the members of a community will not find that they live a life in common. And thus common goods will play a smaller part in their lives. They will find happiness in private life, either alone or with a few family members and friends. Civic engagement will be lacking or die out entirely.

Liberal theorists, on the other hand, typically are suspicious of the call for homogeneity. Liberals insist on tolerance for those who have views of the good life different from that of the majority. They welcome this diversity as a spurt to developments of all sorts: moral, religious, political and scientific. They are dubious about any efforts to reduce the multiplicity of points of view found in the liberal political community. While they know that diversity may undermine the pursuit of the common good, many liberals think this is an acceptable trade-off for the tolerance of difference that is central to the liberal project. Indeed, many theorists argue that liberal politics works best when citizens are diverted from public to private and from politics to

[1] I want to thank all my friends and colleagues at West Mt. Airy Neighbors (WMAN), who have taught me a great deal about community and diversity. Special thanks go to my friends Laurie Beck Peterson, past President and current Executive Director of WMAN and Laura Siena, past Vice President for Development of WMAN. This, like all of my work, is made possible by the support of Diane Gottlieb and Katja Gottlieb-Stier, the most important members of my strongest community.

economics. When that happens, the contentiousness of politics is reduced. Political decisionmaking is then left in the hands of a few professionals who, while ultimately responsible to the judgment of the people, are free to act as they think is best for the whole community.

Contemporary defenders of communitarianism (or such related ideals as civic humanism or Republicanism or participatory democracy) are, then, in a bit of a quandary. For they remain liberals as well as communitarians. They wish to create strong communities and yet also want to avoid threats to the liberal rights we hold dear. They want people to be devoted to the common good, but are not willing to give up the diversity of ideals and interests that makes it so hard to find the common good and create civic virtue.

All proposals to overcome the difficulty of creating political communities that are both liberal and communitarian are partial solutions. What I want to offer in this paper is one more, partial solution. My approach reverses the direction of most discussions of this question. As I have done so far in this paper, we typically ask what characteristics must be found in a place and time if people are to have one kind of political community or another. This is a perfectly legitimate question. But to ask that question alone might blind us to the way in which certain kinds of political institutions and practices can shape or transform a whole political community. My central claim, then, is that by establishing democratic institutions and practices we can not only foster diversity but create the kinds of diverse communities that are communitarian in nature. Democracy need not be undermined by diversity. Rather, democracy can help create the kind of diversity that supports a politics that is, at the same time, liberal and communitarian

The solution I propose intersects in interesting ways with ideas about deliberative democracy that have, in recent years, been put forward by a number of theorists.[2] Theorists of deliberative democracy in many respects offer a way to think about democratic practice that

TWO ANSWERS

How can we create strong communities in a liberal polity? In previous work I have suggested two, mutually reinforcing, paths.[3]

Pluralism

The first is to rely on pluralism. Strong communities are most important to us when they are local communities, when we can engage in the face to face interaction that stimulates civic virtue and a deep respect for the common good. But while each strong community may need to be somewhat homogenous, there is no reason that there cannot be a plurality of such strong communities throughout the land.

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[2] Among other works, see Jürgen Habermas, Between Facts and Norms: Contributions ot a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy, trans. William Rehg, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996) and John S. Dryzek, Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy and Political Science (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1990).

[3] Marc Stier, "How Much of Communitarianism is Left (and Right)?" in Peter Augustine Lawler and Dale McConkey, eds. *Community and Political Thought Today* (Praeger, 1998). An expanded version of this paper is available on my website www.stier.net. I have written about related issues in an unpublished paper *Liberal Virtue / Communitarian Virtue*, which is also available on my website.

A robust pluralism requires a great deal of decentralization. And it requires groups with differing views on important issues to allow each other to pursue their own path in life. This kind of tolerance is, even at this time, difficult to sustain in a large political community. In recent American practice, for example, both left and right frequently give in to the urge to use the Federal government to override local variations in public policy. The pursuit of one or another vision of the good—or even more often of one or another conception of our rights—justifies both left and right in this practice. This sets limits on the usefulness of pluralism as a means of reconciling the tension between liberal and communitarian ideals.

Another, practical limitation on the usefulness of pluralism is that the highly mobile way of life we have developed makes it difficult to sustain homogeneity even at the local level. At the very least, some other mechanism is needed to create a sense of community when people in one locality are not homogeneous is all relevant respects.

Of course, even if all politics is local, not all politics remains local. And thus strong, local communities will have to work together to attain a broader common good. It is in such projects that citizens can learn the virtues of mutual respect and toleration for those different from themselves. This may be difficult to accomplish if there are strong, homogenous, local communities

Partial communities

The second answer to the tension between liberalism and communitarianism rests on the recognition that many strong communities are partial communities. In the pluralist world of liberal democracy, there are all kinds of overlapping communities. Among others, there are communities based in a certain territory, a workplace, a profession, a racial, ethnic or national group, a sexual identity, a mutual concern, a recreational interest or an ideological affinity. Some of these communities involve face to face interaction while others are largely virtual in nature. Moreover, almost all of us are members of more than one such community. These local communities are, by and large, made up of people who share certain ends and a point of view. They are exclusive, but only within a certain sphere of life. They are strong, but partial communities. They do require their members to be committed to certain broadly defined ends. But these ends do not, by themselves, define each individual member of the community. For, most of the members of each community are members of others as well. Partial communities are generally not geographic communities, rooted in some place. They are centered on what we rather than where we are.

Of course, partial communities, like strong local communities will have to work together to attain some of their goals. And it is, again, in such interaction that the members of a strong local community will learn civic virtues that transcend those found in their own circle. That, together with the overlapping membership that characterizes partial communities, will teach people the importance of mutual respect and tolerance for diversity.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

These answers to the tension between pluralism and communitarianism remain plausible to me. Yet they are not likely to be sufficient in all cases. There will still be circumstances in which liberal and communitarian aims are in tension.

This is especially like to be true if we imagine geographic communities: neighborhoods, cities, and states. Geographic communities are still important in liberal polities, yet many geographic communities are, and are likely to remain, highly diverse in nature. In many city neighborhoods people from diverse cultural traditions and with different economic means live side by side. That diversity is now also found in suburbs as well, especially in the inner, railroad suburbs found in our older cities.

One response to the difficulty of creating strong communities in diverse settings is to point out that for all the diversity of America today, our geographic communities are becoming less diverse then they have been in the past. Suburbanization remains the most important engine for creating homogeneous communities. Suburbs, including inner or railroad suburbs, were originally created as an escape from the diversity of city life. The white Protestant middle class in late 18th century England and 19th century America created the suburbs as a refuge from the jumble of mixed uses and diverse peoples found in urban areas. They retreated to the outskirts of central cities where they created a new kind of community, characterized by free standing homes on verdant sites. Yet they sought to remain close to the commercial activity and cultural riches of urban centers.

This same drive for homogeneity characterized the development of outer suburbs that began after World War II and continues to this day albeit at an ever greater distance from central cities. In the last thirty years, commerce and, to some extent, culture has followed housing development and now, with the development of edge cities, we have created forms of suburban—or exurban—living that has given up many of its connections to the central city.[4]

The continued flight of overwhelmingly white and white collar workers from cities and inner suburbs to new suburban developments might seem to be a solution to the communitarian hope to create strong local communities that are centered on a certain vision of the good. But, as we shall see in more detail at the end of this paper, there is a strong counter-movement back into city centers and inner suburbs by people who long for the excitement created by the diversity of urban life. So we cannot rely on suburbanization to create the homogeneity that a communitarian might seem to require.

Nor should we be happy with the creation of homogeneous suburbs. For this is not a phenomenon pleasing to either liberals or civic republicans.

The liberal hope to enhance tolerance and mutual respect among the citizenry is undermined when the barriers between classes and races are raised higher and higher. And the (egalitarian) liberal hope to open economic opportunity to poor whites and blacks is increasingly stymied by the geographic isolation of the jobs and residences of the upper middle class and, as

[4] This analysis of the changing role of different kinds of urban and suburban areas is drawn from Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

importantly, by the dramatic disparity in the quality of education provided in the schools districts of America.

And while ever more homogenous communities are created in the outer suburbs, they are not the kinds of communities favored by civic republicans. The car-centered lifestyle of suburbia tends to undermine a sense of community. Long commutes to work and to the myriad after school and weekend activities of children cuts into the time people have for communal activities. New suburbs are not likely to have the institutions and traditions of involvement (or the sidewalks and newspapers) that make for a strong sense of community. What sense of community they have is further undermined by high rates of population turnover.

In addition, outer suburbs can be so homogeneous and privatized that people see little reason to be involved in community affairs. Politics requires disagreement and debate over the common good to draw people to meetings. There is always the potential for political debate and disagreement in local politics. But when people have more or less the same goals; when those goals primarily revolve around the acquisition of individual goods; and when a rising tax base makes it easy to avoid difficult choices, there is a tendency for citizens to tend their own garden while leaving politics to the professionals.

A further problem for communitarians is that the outer suburbs are so drained of distinctive colors that the pluralist notion of many strong local communities interacting with one another is undercut. The homogeneity that communitarians seek is not the bland, sameness of the suburbs but the vibrant and exciting mosaic of more or less homogeneous neighborhoods that, because they live side by side, must continually interact with one another.

If we are to resolve the tension between liberalism and communitarianism about the problem of diversity, then, we will have to find a way to create political communities that are homogeneous enough to make community possible yet that are diverse and stimulating enough both to draw people into community life and to make different people comfortable within one another. This seems like a very tall order.

It is time to reverse direction and think about the relationship between community and participatory democracy in a somewhat different light. We have, to this point, been taking the nature of our community as more or less fixed and asking what kind of community can best support the form of democratic engagement characteristic of communitarian regimes. I would like to suggest that we should also ask what kind of political community can support the rich, vibrant, and diverse kind of community that both liberals and communitarians find attractive. And my argument is that communitarian or participatory political institutions can help create those kinds of diverse communities.

WEST MT. AIRY

The Creation of West Mt. Airy

My argument is based not so much on my reading in political thought or political science but in my practical experience as community activist in the part of Philadelphia in which I live, West Mt. Airy.[5]

West Mt. Airy is one of only about ten stable integrated middle class communities in the country. For close to forty years, fifty percent of the population of West Mt. Airy has been black and fifty percent has been white. Like most other such communities, West Mt. Airy did not just happen. At a time when other parts of Philadelphia—and thousands of similar neighborhoods in other cities—were tipping from white to black, people in our community formed at organization, West Mt. Airy Neighbors (WMAN) to try to stem this trend.[6] While welcoming African Americans who wanted to move into the neighborhood, the founders of WMAN worked hard to keep whites from moving out. They did this in a number of ways.[7]

First, the founders of WMAN redefined their neighborhood. Mt. Airy had long been a fairly ill defined northern section part of Germantown. When WMAN organized, much of Germantown, and those parts of Mt. Airy East of Germantown Avenue had already become overwhelmingly black. By inventing a community called West Mt. Airy and defining its boundaries to include a balance of white and blacks, the founders of WMAN hoped to encourage residents to see their area as special and not subject to the pressures that had transformed Germantown and what came to be known as East Mt. Airy.

These pressures were also met by counter-pressures. By means of neighborhood lobbying and city ordinance, WMAN limited the practices of real estate agents that lead to blockbusting, the main practice by which neighborhoods were tipped from white to black. Realtors were

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[5] I joined the Board of Directors of West Mt. Airy Neighbors soon after moving to the area. I served as Vice President for Community Affairs for three years and am in the middle of my third year as president of the organization. Just to give you an idea of the density of political involvement in the community, I also serve on the Board of Directors of one of our sister organizations, our community development corporation, Mt. Airy USA, on the Board of Directors of one of the two main arts organizations in the area, the Sedgwick Cultural Center, and recently left the Board of Directors of a private school to which many people in our community send their children, the Miquon School. I am by no means unique in serving multiple organizations. The boards of all these organizations have overlapping memberships. Many of us are also connected to the local political establishment serving, as I do, as what is called in other places precinct captains for the Democratic Party.

In April 2004 I ran, unsuccessfully in the Democratic primary for State Representative against a ten year incumbent. Although I am white, I received about 43% of the vote in a district that is 80% African-American. The incumbent received 50% of the vote and another challenger received 7%. That I came so close was due to the overwhelming vote I got in the Mt. Airy section of the district where I won close to 90% of the vote and captured overwhelming majorities among both white and black voters.

[6] WMAN is pronounced we-man.

[7] The information about the early days of WMAN found in the next few paragraphs is drawn from Barbara Ferman, Theresa Singleton and Don DeMarco *Neighborhood Diversity in West Mt. Airy, Philadelphia:* A Report funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, April 1996; my own talks with many of the leaders of the organization in its early days; and by the oral histories that were presented at two WMAN events: our spring 1999 annual meeting and our celebration of the 40th anniversary of the organization in the fall of 1999. Some of this material appears on the WMAN website at www.wman.net. I have been especially helped by the recollections of the Pat Henning, the long time chair of the Historical Awareness Committee of WMAN.

pressured to stop promoting there services in a ways that encouraged members of the community to selling their homes. Strict regulations were put on the use of “for sale” and “sold” signs.

WMAN also took steps to break down the sense of distrust and fear that threatened to erupt between whites and blacks. It organized a series of “walks and talks” in which neighbors went up and down their streets to get to know their neighbors. House parties also served to break the ice between blacks and whites. The object, of course, was to get both blacks and whites to recognize the commonalities that could be found underneath their differences.

As a result of this effort, whites and blacks recognized that they shared the goal of living in an integrated community. Neither side wanted to become or remain a small minority in the community. But, by the same token, both sides welcomed a truly integrated community. The whites of Mt. Airy were already liberals. Many of them were teachers in the public schools of Philadelphia or at the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel, or Temple. Others were professionals and managers, many of whom worked in the public sector. A large proportion was Jews who were committed on ideological grounds to liberal public policy and had just built a new synagogue in the community. All favored integration in principle, but were terribly worried about the future of their neighborhood. They worried about their property values. And they were concerned about the urban ills—especially crime and drug use—that, they feared, might become more prevalent if blacks moved in to the neighborhood. The walks and talks and the other efforts of WMAN convinced them that if they made a collective decision to stay put, their fears for the neighborhood would not be realized. They recognized that their black neighbors had similar concerns and were as committed as they were to preserving property values and avoiding city problems.

The African Americans who moved into Mt. Airy also wanted it to remain integrated. Some of them shared the fear of their white neighbors about what might happen to the neighborhood if it became overwhelmingly black. But African Americans had another reason to want the neighborhood to remain racially balanced. For these upwardly mobile Blacks believed that their children would be advantaged by living in an integrated community. The heady days of the civil rights movement gave them hope that they their children would be better placed to take advantage of the opportunities opening up for blacks if they were raised to live and work comfortably among whites. Yet, at the same time, the African Americans who first moved to West Mt. Airy did not want to live in an overwhelmingly white world. They were hopeful that others like themselves would follow them to this new community.

Neighborhood organizing alone did not make West Mt. Airy a successfully integrated community. The diversity of the housing stock—including beautiful, large early twentieth century single family houses; spacious twins as well as row houses and apartment buildings — played a role The large trees on every block and the proximity to both Center City and Fairmount Park helped, too. West Mt. Airy was and remains attractive to both whites and blacks. But other neighborhoods, including sections of Germantown and East Mt. Airy as well as the Olney and Oak Lane sections of the city had similar advantages. The dramatic kind of integration found in West Mt. Airy was not found elsewhere. The difference, I believe, was the determination of the founders of WMAN, and the community at large, to make integration work. West Mt. Airy was created by this effort.

Civic Involvement in West Mt. Airy

The effort to create a diverse community in West Mt. Airy built upon citizens committed to the common good. And the effort strengthened that commitment, not least by making everyone aware of just how special our community is. Over the last fifty years that same civic spirit that created West Mt. Airy and WMAN lead to the formation of other institutions that have continued to play a major role in the lives of citizens in this community. The Allens Lane Art Center was developed even earlier than WMAN, in the early 1950s. It has provided the community with a wide range of courses and program in the arts, an amateur theatre, and a summer camp among other programs. These programs were, from the first, designed to bring the races together. Together with its partner across Germantown Avenue, East Mt. Airy Neighbors, WMAN created Mt. Airy Day, a "day to love Mt. Airy" as well as the community development corporation that eventually evolved into Mt. Airy USA. MA•USA has in recent years played a major role in stimulating commercial development on the Avenue. Early in its life, it partnered with WMAN and another institution, the Sedgwick Cultural Center to create a festival for the arts, Art Jam. The Sedgwick has continued to sponsor concerts and a craft and art gallery for the Artists League of Mt. Airy (ALMA). The Mt. Airy Learning Tree, an organization that provides a wide range of non-credit adult education courses, was another a spin-off of WMAN as was a local newspaper, the Mt. Airy Times, which eventually merged with another paper to form the Times-Express.

This pattern of creating new institutions to address community problems has continued. In just the last few years, WMAN has begun a Neighborhood Network that links block captains and the heads of multi-block neighborhood organizations to one another and to WMAN. WMAN has also started a Safety Network that tracks criminal activity and reports to both the police and the community. When the major train line running through West Mt. Airy was threatened by state budget cuts, WMAN took the lead in creating a new organization, the Northwest Campaign for Public Transportation (NCPT), that united community organizations in Mt. Airy and it neighboring communities, Chestnut Hill, East Falls, and Germantown in defense of our train line, the R8.

Other new community organizations have been created in West Mt. Airy in recent years, often with the help of WMAN. WMAN provided logistical support for an organization of parents and community members that built a new $140,000 playground at the Henry Houston School. (More about this below). WMAN has also committed itself to provide administrative support for Friends of the Monoshone (FoM), a group that is trying to reduce pollution in the streams that run through part of West Mt. Airy.

I have only scratched the surface in this extraordinary story of institution building in the last forty five years in West Mt. Airy. But this story testifies to the high degree of public activism and civic involvement found in this community. Each of these initiatives was created by people who did a great deal of work. But that work is made easier when, as frequently has been the case in Mt. Airy, one institution helps create or support a second. And, once these institutions are in business, the barriers to community involvement are dramatically lowered. It is very difficult to start a community organization. One has to spend hours in one planning meeting after another. And thus the first board members of a community organization have an extraordinarily hard job to do. They have to convince people that a new institution is needed and then encourage people to join in and help out. However, once the organization is established, it is much easier for

people to play a small role, whether as members or as participants in community affairs, or even as board members and officers of the organization.

Each community organization in West Mt. Airy has a board of directors of fifteen or twenty people that meets on a regular basis. Each one has public events of various kinds through out the year, including fund raising events. If one multiplies these institutions by the number of people involved in them, then it is reasonable to think that a not insignificant proportion of the 12,000 adults in West Mt. Airy has been active in common affairs at some time during their residence in the community.

DEMOCRACY AND DIVERSITY IN WEST MT. AIRY

How Democracy Creates Diversity

The central lesson to be gained from this story is that diversity need not be seen as inconsistent with strong community and participatory democracy. Indeed, it is more plausible to say that diversity requires democracy because only democracy can overcome the distrust engendered by diversity. The pursuit of homogeneity that characterized the initial development of the suburbs was a result of fear and distrust. This was partly, but not wholly, the result of prejudice. It was also the product of the entirely reasonable expectation that people from different backgrounds will have different visions of the common good. While we Americans flaunt our individualism, we know that our own well-being is closely tied to local political institutions and polices that seek to realize our aspirations for our communities. And we have feared that where people are different—in income, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation—we could not expect to find agreement in these aspirations.

This fear is not entirely misplaced. But, we in West Mt. Airy, and other places like us, know that if we are to benefit from the frisson of living in a diverse community, we have to learn how to overcome our fears of one another and to work together despite our differences. And that, in turn, requires that we constantly talk with one another about our problems, negotiate with one another over our differences, and form agreements with one another to attain our common purposes.

It was talk of this sort that created West Mt. Airy. It took a persistent effort to explicitly address the tensions, difficulties, and fears that come along with integration in order to overcome these difficulties. And it takes a similar effort to sustain a community that is becoming even more diverse as Asian Americans and gay and lesbian families move into our neighborhood. The organizational strength and civic commitment found in West Mt. Airy is absolutely necessary if this community is to successfully deal with new challenges.

How Democracy Sustains Diversity

No community in a dynamic polity and society like the United States can be static. West Mt. Airy, like most other places, faces—and largely welcomes—continual development or redevelopment of all kinds. New houses are built and old ones torn down or reconstructed. Some businesses close while others expand and new one come into our community. New churches and

schools are created while old ones close or dramatically change their programs. New parks and recreational facilities are developed and old ones rehabilitated. Most of these developments offer something positive to the community. But there is also the likelihood of dispute and disagreement every time something changes. In Mt. Airy, like everywhere else, a proposal for a new playground or business or housing project or school typically divides the community. Some people think it is a wonderful idea. Others think that the quality of their own lives will be irreparably damaged by an unwanted innovation. But while other communities have these disputes, they are likely to become especially contentious in a diverse community, in which people have different ideas about what developments are beneficial to themselves and to everyone else and, even more, in which people fear that those who differ from them will look at common affairs in a radically different way. Every point of disagreement in a community like Mt. Airy has the potential for creating serious divisions rooted in our differences, especially of race and class. Every such division has the potential for stopping projects that might, in some form, serve the common good. And every time division leads not just to delay and stasis but conflict and contention, some people are likely to decide that they do not wish to live in a community as diverse as our own.

What makes controversial issues particularly stressful in West Mt. Airy is precisely our commitment to civic engagement. That people in West Mt. Airy are so concerned about the community makes it an even more contentious place than it otherwise would be. There is little than a developer or a community activities can do in our community that is not subject to discussion, debate and, quite frequently, disagreement. Thus the very virtues on which we pride ourselves can, when circumstances become difficult, undermine our unity.

It is precisely in these cases that democracy is necessary. A democratic community can find ways to recognize common aims and to forge compromises where the goals of different groups of people diverge. These compromises do not necessarily have to satisfy everyone. People must have a chance to make their views known and to have an impact on common decisions. Together with the willingness of our community to revisit issues once the consequence of our decisions become more apparent, democratic participation reconciles most of our citizens to living in a diverse community. Even more, the very process of making decisions by means of dialogue and debate creates pride in the community and a willingness to stick together despite our differences.

Let me give three recent examples of how the democratic character of our community helped overcome the tensions that diversity creates.

A new Acme Supermarket

For a long time Mt. Airy has lived with a dilapidated Acme supermarket. We in the community have no doubt that the sorry state of this store was a direct result of Acme's decision to disinvest from our community when it became racially integrated.

After many years of discussion, and a great deal of political pressure, Acme agreed to develop a new store in the community. However its first two plans for the store would have created unfair burdens on its near neighbors. In particular, Acme proposed to cut down a wooded area that had been deliberately created as a buffer zone between the commercial district and

residences when the current store had been built. Acme also proposed to use put the truck loading bays right on a city street, which would have created dangerous conditions for residents.

Tensions arose in the community in response to the Acme proposal. A number of meetings were held at which a great deal of vociferous argument took place. Many residents of the community, especially those who lived far from store wanted a new store at all costs. Near neighbors, however, did not want to bear the burdens of the new store. Every meeting started with a half hour of what soon came to seem like ritual denunciation of Acme for treating us so badly for so long.

WMAN, together with other community groups and our City Council Member, Donna Reed Miller, engaged in extensive discussions in the community in order to reach a common response to the Acme proposal. As a result of those discussions was that a broad community consensus was created, at least among the leaders of the four organizations involved in the dispute, and to a lesser extent among the members of the community as a whole. Those who lived farther from the store recognized the concerns of the near neighbors and decided to defend them. Most of the near neighbors recognized that they would have to accept some infringement upon the buffer zone. We decided to welcome the store and even accept Acme's unfortunate suburban orientation of it, provided that Acme moved the store from most of the buffer zone and moved the truck loading bays from the street. Acme's first two "final" proposals rejected our demands. And then, over a period of 18 months, WMAN worked to bring pressure to bear on Acme to develop a new proposal that would meet our requirements. Finally Acme did so. A new $7 million supermarket was opened in March of 2004. It has taken some time for the supermarket to get off the ground economically. People form fairly fixed shopping patterns and, after years of distress, few people in the community had any experience shopping at this location. But, by November of 2004 business has picked up and its long term survival is no longer in question. Most everyone who shops at the store is pleased with it. And the new traffic it has brought to our business district seems to be helping other businesses in the area.

New Covenant Campus

New Covenant Church is a primarily African American Church that a few years ago bought the former home of Spring Garden College. In the spring of 2003, WMAN discovered that the near neighbors of the New Covenant Campus had grown increasingly frustrated with problems coming from the campus. New Covenant rents space on its large campus to four schools. Some of the children who attend them walked through neighbors' yards. This led to trash piling up around the fences separating the campus from nearby houses. And perhaps the greatest problem was the sounds that came from a gymnasium on the campus that was close to a large number of homes. These sounds were mostly the product of special services and programs being held for children. Neighbors complained about the noise created by children, by loud music, and by a dynamic preacher.

In addition to these and other problems, the neighbors were frustrated because they did not know where to register their complaints. Some representatives of New Covenant were helpful and responsive. But, just as often, complaints did not seem to go to those who could deal with them. The difficulties had become so serious that residents were threatening to sell their homes and leave not just West Mt. Airy but the city of Philadelphia itself.

Officials at New Covenant were frustrated, too. New Covenant Church has contributed West Mt. Airy in many ways. And they knew that some problems had developed as use of the campus rapidly expanded. But the complaints they heard were scattered, unfocused, and, occasionally, nasty. Moreover, officials at New Covenant wondered why their services had come under attack when loud music, singing, and preaching can be heard on Sunday morning in many a church throughout the city. That a majority—though by no means all of the near neighbors were white—lead church officials to fear that some racial animus lay behind the complaints. As it sought a zoning variance for a new sign, New Covenant tried to reach out to the neighbors. But the church did not seem to know who it should talk to in order to find out how to deal with community problems.

Neighbors of New Covenant came to WMAN for help. And, as WMAN usually does, it promised to help the neighbors help themselves. That meant aiding the neighbors in their efforts to organize themselves. WMAN sponsored meetings at which problems with New Covenant were discussed and an agenda for discussion with the churched created. New neighborhood leaders emerged from these discussions. They became co-coordinators of the Neighbors of New Covenant (NNC). WMAN scheduled a meeting between the NNC and New Covenant.[8] After a few last minute problems were overcome, a productive session was held. New Covenant agreed to work with the neighbors to solve some problems immediately and, even more importantly, to appoint a high level contact person for the neighbors. The neighbors agreed to work through WMAN and the new contact person to present problems and suggest solutions.

In the last two years, tensions between the neighbors and New Covenant have not been fully resolved. Continued consultations have been necessary. Agreements between the church and its neighbors has lead to an agreement to cease the noisy youth services in the summer months, when people most want to leave their doors and windows open or stay outside and when the church was inclined to open the doors of its gymnasium to keep the participants in these services cool. Another agreement was reached limiting the volume on the public address system used during these services. For their part, most of neighbors have agreed to live with some disturbances. And one neighbor has sold his houses and moved. Not all problems have been addressed. But many have been dealt with and, at least for all but one or two neighbors who live closest to the Church property, the noise issue is under control.

The Houston Playground

WMAN made a decision in late 2001 to support the Houston School Playground Raising Project (PRP). WMAN supported for the PRP by allowing them to use its 501(c)(3) tax status to raise funds which allowed people to make tax deductible contributions to the playground, by providing banking and other services to them, and by asking its membership to contribute to the PRP.

When WMAN debated helping the PRP, an important consideration was whether the proposed playground would be opposed by the near neighbors. As in previous two cases shows,

[8] One further element to the story illustrates the importance of the organizational density of West Mt. Airy. It was relatively easy for me, as President of West Mt. Airy, to gain the trust of one of the officials at New Covenant Church because he and I both sit on the board of our community development corporation, Mt. Airy USA.

WMAN has traditionally tried to balance the good of the whole neighborhood with the concerns of near neighbors of any new project or development. After finding little opposition to the playground, WMAN decided to support it.

By June of 2002, however, as the playground project gained greater support in the community as a whole, opposition to it grew substantially among the near neighbors of the Houston School (NNHS). As in many disputes in West Mt. Airy, there were racial undertones present. Most of the homes around the Houston School are owned by whites. Yet the majority of students at the school are black. Many of the leaders of the NNHS expressed their hope that the dilapidated playground at the school could be replaced. Yet underneath some of the worries expressed about the playground and community use of it during the after school hours, was the all too common fear of teenagers, and especially black teenagers, that characterizes America. When some supporters of the playground said that opposition to it was racist in nature, relations between the PRP and NNHS, which were already marred by distrust and a lack of communication, deteriorated further. Threats of lawsuits were made, and the whole project was in danger. And, once again, some members of the community were saying that if they did not get their way they would leave the community.

WMAN decided to try to help the two sides overcome their differences. In a series of meetings and hundreds of emails and phone calls, I encouraged representatives of the PRP and NNHS to meet, talk, and negotiate. I engaged in shuttle diplomacy for a month, talking first to one side and then the other, before the parties began to talk to each other. WMAN also helped legitimate the organization of near neighbors that was then just beginning to form. As often happens in Wet Mt. Airy, two people—one of the general coordinators of the PRP and one of the leaders of the NNHS – stepped up and were willing to lead the respective groups in our efforts to work out a compromise. Drawing on these discussions, WMAN put forth a compromise proposal at the end of July 2002. It called for a reorientation of the playground, for the playground to be fenced and locked when not in use, and for measure to be taken to address the neighbors concerns about parking and safety. The PRP and NNHS accepted the WMAN proposals.

Since then, WMAN worked with the PRP and NNHS to make the playground itself a reality. A WMAN Committee, composed of representatives of the PRP, NNHS, the school itself, and political leaders has been created to monitor and regulate use of the playground. The first two years in the life of the committee has been full of debate and controversy. Controversy was especially intense in the first year of the committee, during the summer of 2003. To insure that the near neighbors were not unduly disturbed by the new playground, the committee, which I head, decided to close the playground early in the evening on weekdays, at 7:00 pm. An outcry from working parents was soon heard. Nasty letters and emails were exchanged and published in the local paper. Petitions were circulated to extend the hours. Some folks even called for revoking the agreement that had created the WMAN Playground Committee.

Another set of meetings were held to which all the parties were invited. At a key moment, one of the protestors step forward with a proposal to extend the closing time by an hour and to have parents monitor the playground. The near neighbors reluctantly accepted this compromise. And so another dispute was resolved. The controversy restarted in the summer of 2004. Proponents of extended playground hours were unwilling to extend the monitoring system, on the grounds that so few problems were occurring during the extended playground hours. Some

near neighbors claimed that they were betrayed by this decision. Others, however, recognized that extended hours were actually reducing the late night problems that sometimes resulted from unofficial use of the playground by teenagers. Again, a marathon meeting with representatives from all sides resolved this dispute. Since then, we have decided that monthly meetings of the Playground Committee are unnecessary. Two meetings a year, at the spring and fall equinox, seem to be sufficient to monitor the use of a playground that is, for most members of the community, now an object of political controversy but a symbol of what Mt. Airy can achieve by working together.

The Importance of Civic Involvement

These three issues are not, in themselves, the stuff of high drama. Yet problems like these continually arise in West Mt. Airy. They always receive a great deal of attention in the local press. And, if they are mishandled, the fear of diversity that lurks within every community in America can lead to heightened tension, distrust, and dissatisfaction. And with enough such controversies, the commitment of residents not only to working with others in West Mt. Airy but to living here will begin to dry up.

West Mt. Airy has created a positive spiral in which our civic involvement sustains not only a wide range of institutions and organizations but the kinds of commitment to dialogue and debate that enables us to deal with civic controversies of this kind. If those controversies become so heated and intense that no resolution at least partly acceptable to most everyone can be found, than a negative spiral will set in. Discord and disagreement will undermine our communal institutions and our civic spirit. And then fear and distrust will fester and be exacerbated by the diversity of which we are now so proud.

The kind of discussion and debate that overcomes discord and disagreement in West Mt. Airy does not always look like the rational will-formation so prised by theorists of deliberative democracy. Our discussions sometimes engender mutual respect. But along the way there is a great deal of name calling and invective. The debates about both the Acme and the Houston Playground were, in a few cases, horribly nasty. People are sometimes willing to hear each other. But it often takes a few meetings before this happens. And sometimes it takes a threat to something dear to them to get the attention of people engaged in some dispute. Only when the Playground Raising Project realized that the Houston Playground would be delayed by a lawsuit did its members begin to recognize that the near neighbors had some legitimate concerns. Only when WMAN threatened to oppose all zoning variances at New Covenant Church did church officials agree to sit down with near neighbors. Only when faced with the prospect of Acme leaving an old empty in their backyard did the near neighbors of the store agree that they would give up a ten feet of their buffer zone.

Yet, once forced to sit and talk, the parties to each of these disputes did come to look at their situation in a new light. They did recognize that there was another point of view besides their own. They did come to see that there was both self-interest and ideals on all sides. And while complete consensus was never reached in any of these cases, some broad agreements were found and enough compromises were made to allow for a satisfactory resolution of many of these issues. Provided we understand the term “discursive” to include high-decibel argument and

the occasional threat to blow up a supermarket or to leave the area it is not so far fetched to see that West Mt. Airy successfully practices a kind of discursive democracy.

One should note that for these democratic debates to continue and for a diverse community like West Mt. Airy to survive, it is not absolutely necessary that everyone be satisfied all or most of the time. That kind of solution is more likely in homogenous communities. And, of course, one reason people threaten to leave West Mt. Airy when they are dissatisfied is that they know there are neighborhoods in the Philadelphia where they would not have to live with circumstances that displease them. The people in West Mt. Airy who do not want to live near a supermarket or a black church or a school playground have options. They can move somewhere else.

So, why do they stay? There are, I think, two reasons. The first is that people do welcome diversity. There is a kind of excitement in a diverse, engaged, and active community that one cannot find in a homogeneous one. And there is a great sense of both pride and comfort in living in an integrated community. Those of us who live in West Mt. Airy, both white and black, know that racial division remains at the center of all that is wrong with America.[9] And we feel pride in living in a way that does something to overcome it.

We also find that living in an integrated community makes us comfortable with our country. Racial division often makes it difficult for blacks and whites to feel comfortable in each other's company. It is hard to step outside of our "comfort zone." Most parts of America are integrated just enough that blacks and whites interact all the time. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, it is hard not to see that those interactions are often strained and inauthentic. After living in an integrated community for a few years, one gets past all this. To be comfortable with one another is, for both blacks and whites, like being able, for the first time, to breathe freely in one's own home. Every day in Mt Airy you can see blacks and whites interact with a kind of comfort that is rarely seen elsewhere.

The second reason people stay in West Mt. Airy is the democratic character of the community. As its theorists argue, discursive democracy does change the way people view their community and one another. People in West Mt. Airy have learned to live with disagreement and with resolutions to issues that do not entirely please them because they have been heard and have heard others. People are more likely to live with things they do not like when they have had an opportunity to express their views and when they feel that those empowered to make decisions are listening. And they are especially likely to accept a compromise solution when they recognize that those who disagree with them have good reasons for their views. In American politics today we automatically assume that when the good guys do not get our way—that is, when we do not get our way—the reason is that some special interest group has exerted undue influence on a political decision. That kind of complaint is frequently made in West Mt. Airy, too. At one time or another everyone on each side of the disputes I have summarized has made this accusation against someone else. Everyone claims to be upholding the true and the good against the selfishness of their opponents. But it does not take much discussion and debate with

[9] Indeed, one of the important reasons that we need integrated communities is that it reminds whites just how true this is. One doesn't have to live in West Mt. Airy long to know that the problems that we have—from our lousy supermarket to the high auto insurance rates we pay—result in some part from racism. Whites as well as blacks suffer from racism in an integrated community. Thus they can't deny its continued importance in our lives.

one's neighbors to recognize that this is not how politics is usually played in West Mt. Airy. When people do not get their way, it is because other people have different views about the common good or interests of their own that are widely seen as legitimate. That recognition makes compromise and moderation possible.

The democratic character of West Mt. Airy encourages people to stay in the community for another reason as well: people like living in a politically engaged community. As Oscar Wilde once said, socialism may take too many evenings. But democratic discussion and debate is attractive to many people who like going to meetings and making their case. They like being consulted by their neighbors, by community leaders and by political officials. They like complaining and they like compromising. And, also, they like knowing that if they have an idea for bettering the community—from cleaning up an abandoned house to starting a new organization—there are ways and means of putting it into practice. The political density of West Mt. Airy makes it special, and makes people willing to put up with the problems that diversity brings.

West Mt. Airy, then, is a strong community of the kind that communitarians often favor. People in it are knowledgeable about their community and are devoted to the common good. And they are capable, at times, of putting the common good above their own interests. Yet West Mt. Airy is a highly diverse community. And, for most of its citizens, it is a partial not a full community. Most of us who live here have lives and interests beyond our community to which we are devoted. The center of our community, what holds us together, is not any one substantive vision of the good. Rather it is our commitment to the good of diversity itself together with and our common appreciation for democratic way of conducting our affairs.

CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR DIVERSE DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITIES TODAY

Liberal and communitarian political theory struggles with the issue of diversity. Liberals strongly support diversity while fearing that the effort to create a more communitarian form of life will stifle it. And well they might. For Communitarians seek the kind of civic commitment that has traditionally been though to require a great deal of consensus and homogeneity. There are many ways of dealing with this tension. One, described in this paper, is to use diversity to stimulate civic engagement, and democratic participation to make diversity not only palatable but welcome to the whole community. The communal spirit that holds West Mt. Airy together is not so much an agreement on a set of common goals but, rather, a willingness to embrace difference and find negotiated solutions when our differences lead to conflict. As one might expect in a liberal communitarian polity, what holds us together is not just our shared ends but, perhaps even more importantly, our commitment to certain procedural virtues, and especially to tolerance and to democratic participation.[10]

The success of West Mt. Airy leads to the question of whether it is replicable. There are really three questions here. The first is whether other neighborhoods, perhaps in distance places, can use our strategy for creating a sense of community amidst diversity. I see no reason to say

[10] This is a point I made, in a different way, in an unpublished paper Liberal Virtue / Communitarian Virtue which his available at my website. The argument of that paper is that the liberal virtues can grow out of the experiences of negotiating our differences and that the interaction of strong, if partial, communities makes this process more fruitful.

no. We face our own kinds of disputes we face. And we have certain kinds of racial and class divisions that make it difficult to resolve these disputes. But other places have their own class tensions. And given the human tendency to fracture and draw lines between us and them, disputes similar to our racial tensions can be found everywhere.

The second question is what political and social processes might help create more communities of this kind. Here I think there is an interesting answer, at least in America and Europe. Even while new outer suburbs metastasize onto what were once farmland, forest, and desert, a counter-movement back into cities and inner suburbs has been growing stronger. Many professional and managers find the range of ideas and the varied forms of aesthetic expression found in urban areas—not to mention the variety of restaurants—to be increasingly attractive. The movement back into the cities and inner suburbs—the gentrification movement—has revived formerly declining neighborhoods and converted commercial, manufacturing, and warehouse districts into combined residential / commercial areas. These neighborhoods are typically diverse neighborhoods and thus they are potentially subject to the difficulties we have in West Mt. Airy. By the same token, however, they have the same potential for removing these problems by means of democratic participation.

In other countries, different processes might lead to similar results. Countries where urban communities are rapidly growing have an opportunity to encourage the kind of density that characterizes urban neighborhoods and inner suburbs like West Mt. Airy. Perhaps they have an opportunity to avoid the mistakes that created the community unfriendly and economically homogeneous suburbs so common in the United States. While it would take me too far beyond the confines of this paper to address the issue, it seems to me that the central task of planning in urbanizing countries is to create forms of community life that encourage both diversity and the democratic practices that makes for successfully diverse communities.

The third question, then, is how to stimulate the response to diversity that has created West Mt. Airy? To some extent, we must rely on finding people with the vision and civic spirit that characterized the founders of WMAN. There are, in most diverse communities, people with such an outlook. But the task ahead of them will be rough and hard.

It seems to me that this is something that state and city governments in the United States, and central governments elsewhere, can do to support the efforts of people who try to use democracy to sustain diversity. These governments already help communities of the kind we are discussing by using their tax dollars to strengthen the provision of city services, including licensing and inspection services that help transform gentrifying neighborhoods from one sort of area to another. Yet communities, and especially newly diverse communities, need more help, particularly in sustaining the organizations that make diversity possible.

Organizations like WMAN constantly suffer from a shortage of funds and from a limited ability to raise more, especially when the organization is new. Thus it would make sense for states and cities—and charitable foundations—to find ways to support efforts of the kind that created, expanded, and sustained the myriad organizations and groups found in West Mt. Airy. And it would also be helpful if governments and foundations took steps to make the success of communities like West Mt. Airy more widely known.

In other places, the functions of an organization like WMAN will be taken over by local government. Indeed, in some places in the United States, city governments have devolved some of their authority to local councils that carry out the function of community organizations like WMAN. Again, those who want to encourage the kind of democratic diversity I have been discussing in this paper should devise forms of local government that encourage the kinds of broad participation so often found in West Mt. Airy. This can be done in a wide variety of ways. Legal requirements that mandate consultation with those affected by local decisions is one method. Formal town meetings are another. There are many others. The appropriate form will vary a great deal from place to place. What is important, however, is that there be some mechanism that encourages diverse bodies of citizens to talk with and hear one another prior to decisions being made that affect their lives.

With the right kinds of support, and with a growing economy, it is not hard to can imagine many places where democracy can be used to create communities that are vibrant and diverse, and that are, at the same time, civic minded and tolerant.