

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



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A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

The Difference between Talking and Doing

There's a guy I know. You probably don't know him. I don't know a lot of people you know. I may not even know you. But this guy I know is a Mexican dude who lives in Forest View Trailer Park. When he found out his trailer park had been sold to make room for Iowa City's newest gateway project, he helped organize a tenants' association. The tenants' association started meeting with the developers who had already promised to relocate trailers for free just on the other side of the property to make room for a giant hotel and more. The tenants association came up with some principles that the developers agreed to. Principles like new housing costs shouldn't be more than previous housing costs and the rights of tenants to organize should be respected.

The tenants told the developers they appreciated their offer to move the trailers but many of the trailers couldn't be moved and hadn't been moved in decades. The tenants told the developers they thought it made sense to have small permanent homes they could call their own. Small permanent homes would improve people's lives. It would improve the value of the neighborhood and gateway project. It would keep the neighborhood together. The developers thought this all sounded good

too and everyone agreed to agree. This was maybe the first time this happened ever. Because residents were organized and informed, a new model for preserving affordable housing was being born.

The developers offered to donate the land and start looking for funding revenues to finance the small permanent homes. One idea was having the city finance mortgages for these affordable homes with revenue

What a difference local elections make.

bonds. This was just one concept. The city would make this money back and then some over the years. The developer put this idea in an email which the tenants turned into a flyer to distribute to their neighbors.

Some people outside the trailer park found out about the concept and were appalled. They were appalled about using taxpayer money to finance low-income housing. But they couldn't say that publicly. That would make them sound like ogres. That would make them sound un-Democratically in a Democratic county. That would make them sound like they were anti-im-

migrant. They couldn't say that. So they attacked the content of the flyer and the community organization that helped put it together, suggesting the residents must be "confused" and easily misled by complicated information. It was cute. Some people bought it.

But that's not what this article is about. This article is about the difference between doing something and talking about something. It's about showing one's true colors on an issue that's been talked about for decades. It's about the uncomfortable position of having to actually be for or against taking tangible action around a public issue when in the past you could always be for it because there was no tangible action to debate. It's about "Which side are you on?"

Last year when the new city council was elected, it freaked out some people who were used to controlling most city council decisions. Mostly people who were voted out of office or friends of people who were voted out of office. Now they're going on the attack to protect the status quo, and part of their strategy is to get cute with the facts while attacking every small step the new council takes to address housing issues. And at a moment when low-income resident voices are being heard and consid-

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Stand Up, Sit Down, Fight Fight Fight!

By now, whether you're a football fan or not, you have probably heard that San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat down during the playing of the National Anthem at a recent preseason football game to protest the treatment of African-Americans by law enforcement agencies. Somehow, the intent of his protest was overshadowed by claims of disrespect for the national anthem, and heaven forbid – the flag! Since using the flag as a means for protest continues to lead to all sorts of emotional and sometimes random tangents, here are a few more.

Some of the same people criticizing Kaepernick turn their head to the fact that every National Football League player's helmet has an American flag decal. Never mind that the United States Code clearly states that "no part of the flag should ever be used as a costume or athletic uniform." However, a flag patch may be affixed to the uniform of military personnel, firemen, policemen, and members of patriotic organizations (like the United Spanish War Veterans, which is no longer in existence for obvious reasons).

Why hasn't the National Football League or Major League Baseball applied for and received recognition as a Patriotic National Organization chartered by the United States Congress? The Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts have received such recognition, as has the National Future Farmers of America, the Foundation of the Federal Bar Association (which means members may wear flag patches on their suits' shoulders), and the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements, among scores of other organizations. But not one single sports organization is listed as a Patriotic National Organization,

worthy of legally displaying a flag patch according to Congressional approval.

By the way, have you noticed the bastardized flag on the Iowa Hawkeyes Football Team helmets? Stars and stripes are shaped in the image of Herky, and the stars are located on the right side instead of the left side. When hanging the flag, the stars should appear to the observer's left. Placing stars on the right seems to be like hanging it upside-down.

But everything written so far is irrelevant since we have the First Amendment governing our lives; not the First Commandment.

Now, speaking of tangents, let's get back to the anthem: Do you know:

- 1) Who wrote the national anthem?
- 2) During which war was it penned?
- 3) What fort was the author in when it was written?
- 4) Where did the tune originate?

Maybe we should stop all the upset over the anthem and simply get rid of it. After all, very few people can truly hit the high C note and no one sings more than the first verse at any sporting event, probably because of the racist last stanza in the third verse.

*No refuge could save the hireling
and slave*

*From the terror of flight or the gloom
of the grave,*

*And the star-spangled banner in
triumph doth wave*

*O'er the land of the free and the
home of the brave.*

Now there's a good reason to protest.

"Sometimes you have to stand up for something by sitting down." That well-known civil rights mantra began in 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, when four young, black college students sat down at the lunch counter in a Woolworth's store and ordered coffee and doughnuts, knowing they would not be served. They weren't. They weren't arrested, either, as they had expected. So they sat, and sat, and came back the next day, and sat again. The result of their nonviolent action of sitting down was a wave of sit-ins across the country. You have to wonder if they didn't get the idea from an event twelve years earlier in Des Moines, Iowa. On July 7, 1948, "Edna Griffin, John Bibbs, Leonard Hudson and Griffin's daughter, Phyllis, were refused service at Katz Drug Store in downtown Des Moines. A waitress took their order for ice cream but after she was told not to serve them, she reported that they don't serve colored people." State of Iowa v. Katz (241 Iowa 115, 40 N.W. 2d 41 (1949))

But at the end of the day, quarterback Kaepernick's future in football is questionable. Instead of sitting during the final preseason game of the year, he knelt. And a teammate joined him. Up the coast in Oakland, another professional football player who does not know Kaepernick, sat during the national anthem. Now, the San Francisco Police Union is considering not working 49er home games. The shame is on them. At least Kaepernick is brave enough to show up.

Answers to questions above: 1) Francis Scott Key 2) The War of 1812, but it was actually written in 1814 3) None, he was on a British ship outside Fort McHenry in Baltimore. 4) The tune was derived from a drinking song. ✨

–Marty Ryan is the Civil Libertarian
Laureate of Iowa

Turn the Ballot Over!

If you vote in Iowa City you will find on your presidential ballot, hidden away at the bottom of the back page, an amendment to the City Charter. The amendment looks complicated but it is in fact a simple one. It makes it easier for citizens of Iowa City to petition the City Council for a public referendum on a matter of public policy. As we told people when gathering signatures for a petition to put this amendment on the ballot: we are petitioning the city to reduce the number of signatures required for us to petition the city.

This amendment is necessary because Iowa City has a history of making things difficult for citizen initiative, and has recently made it even more difficult. Jokes about “The People’s Republic of Johnson County” notwithstanding, the Iowa City City Council was controlled for as long as anyone can remember by an Old Guard coalition of right-wing Democrats and Republicans. In the Iowa Code the number of signatures for a successful petition is set at 10% of those who voted in the last city election. In order to discourage citizen initiative, Iowa City set a higher standard for the required number of signatures than the state-wide default. To my knowledge, there have been only two citizen-initiated referenda on the ballot in Iowa City in the last forty years.

Although successful in blocking citizen initiative, the Old Guard was not able to prevent public votes on all issues. They have been committed to making the city tax code more regressive, and increasing the share of public spending devoted to the Iowa City Police Department. On these core issues, the Old Guard was required by law to have public votes

in order to carry out their agenda, and the results were not pretty from their point of view.

On three different occasions during the long period of Old Guard rule, elites have come together to put a regressive city sales tax increase on the ballot in order to bolster general revenue. Required by law to have a public ballot, the Old Guard found the sales tax rejected by the voters three times. The city’s policing policy produced a crisis in the criminal justice system, one of overcrowding in the county jail. On three different occasions the county put before the voters a bond issue to greatly expand our jail. Each election provided a valuable opportunity to discuss policing policy and The New Jim Crow, i.e. the disproportionate arrest, prosecution, and incarceration of African Americans for which Iowa City has a national reputation. In a county that routinely votes “yes” on bond issues for schools and libraries, the voters rejected the jail bond proposals all three times. As a result, we have seen a very encouraging fall in the numbers jailed in Johnson County. When given the freedom to vote, voters have shown considerable common sense.

The Old Guard always feared two things: that they would lose their majority on the council (which they finally did last November, to everyone’s great surprise), or that citizens would use the initiative process to challenge their economic development policies, i.e. public subsidies to private developers. Citizens almost succeeded for instance in petitioning for a referendum on one of the city’s more controversial downtown Tax Increment Financing (TIF) schemes.

In what turns out to have been one of the last acts of the Old Guard, they used a city charter review process to raise the number of signatures required even higher, making an already difficult task even harder. A few members of the charter review committee argued that Iowa City should adopt the State Code standard of 10% of voters in the last city election, but they were ignored. The City Charter now requires the signatures of 3600 eligible electors, a virtually impossible standard to meet.

It was that decision, to make the highly restrictive citizen initiative and referendum provisions even more restrictive, that led an independent group of local citizens to organize a petition drive to amend the City Charter to bring Iowa City in line with the Iowa Code which governs most other municipalities. That is what you will find on the ballot if you turn it over. If we are going to have citizen initiative, it should be a usable one. The only purpose of this amendment is to make it easier to petition the city.

It is always possible, of course, that citizens will petition for unwise purposes, but such proposals will still require a petition drive according to the provisions of the Iowa Code, which requires signatures equal to 10% of those voting in the last city general election. A successful petition will then be subject to a public vote after a healthy democratic debate... On the basis of past voting on public issues, voters have shown very good judgement when voting on taxes, schools, libraries, and jails. It appears that we can trust the voters to do the right thing if they are given the freedom to vote. ✨

–Jeff Cox



Sept 15
US Constitution Day

Sept 29
Early voting begins in Iowa

Nov 7
Last day to vote early

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The American Dream

I'm not sold on a Hillary Clinton presidency. I think it would be continued gridlock in Congress, more wealth to the 1%, lip service to the poor and middle class, and continued undeclared, futile, and expensive war. Trump scares me. I know that many presidents have grown in office, but I fear if that didn't happen we would have an administration controlled by the fearful bureaucracy and the generals.

Bernie asked for a peaceful revolution to address the real problems of our country. I fear a Trump presidency would risk another kind of revolution.

That being said, I am amused by the pundits, with their condescending talk of Trump "shooting himself in the foot," making gaffes, and being behind in the polls. These folks are speaking, perhaps not to the 1%, but certainly to the college-educated 25%. They think they know everything, and that all American wisdom is held by the rich and the intelligentsia. Wrong!

There's that 75% out there, described variously as the "white working poor" (as if minorities weren't working, and poor), described in the current issue of Atlantic magazine as grieving the loss of white privilege. Those folks can vote. They were victims of our failing schools, they are not well-skilled, they have lost good jobs and been forced to take lower wages, and THEY ARE MAD.

Add the more marginal working class, those who are demeaned by the need to take food stamps even though they work full time, those who are impoverished by child support that doesn't leave them enough money to survive,

the folks who admire Trump because of his status in the World Wrestling Federation, and you have a considerable constituency.

In the course of my life, I have watched this constituency grow. In the 60s South, I taught white high school students who stayed in school because it was something to do. When I asked about their vocational plans, they said, "Maybe I'll drive a chicken truck" or "I can be a pulp-wooder." Many of them probably ended up sitting on the curb outside the corner store on Main Street, jobless. I have met laid-off workers who have skills that are no longer needed in the American economy, switching from one job to another and never finding rewarding work or decent wages. I know women who work two jobs and can't support their children. They resent the lucky few who are eligible for the entitlement benefits like food stamps, and their resentment grows each week when they see the deductions from their inadequate paychecks.

This wasn't always true. With the help of Social Security Survivors benefits and by working her two jobs, my mother was able to keep us in the middle class. There were academic scholarships to help me get a good education. There was hope and opportunity for kids like me. Nowadays, I mentor children who would not even think of themselves as college material if I didn't push it. And, while I earnestly tell them that education is the only way for people like us to have the life we want, I worry that I am not telling them the truth of life in America today.

I have walked the main street in Toledo Iowa, where the stores are

vacant and the well-paid skilled workers who once cared for children at the Iowa Juvenile Home have decamped to other jobs. I have seen the IJH campus and its \$22 million investment in new buildings sitting abandoned, and listened to the worries of town businessmen whose business has disappeared. They are not all sold on Trump, but they are angry. And they don't trust Crooked Hillary.

The American Dream was always mythical. My ancestors came here in the 1700s. After several generations of hard-working, salt-of-the-earth people, I'm the first college graduate. That rags-to-riches scenario beloved of richer Americans was only a chimera, but enough of us could hope for a good job with a respectable income that there actually was a middle class. It's shrinking. Nowadays a college degree for lower-income kids comes with devastating debt and no promise of a decent job.

The pundits need to come out of their enclave and get real.

While they smirk, the 75% applaud Trump's political incorrectness. His gaffes speak the truth of their hearts. He channels their anger. They forgive his lies and his affluence. He's their hero.

If Trump and the Republican Party can get that constituency registered and get them out to vote, America is in trouble. We should take Trump seriously. ✂

—Carol Thompson lives in northern Coralville

The Difference between Talking and Doing Continued from Page 1

ered by policymakers for the first time in years, this crowd's strategy is to question and try to marginalize those voices at every turn.

Here are the facts. The current Iowa City council has provided relief to dislocated residents of Rose Oaks, hard working community members who, in spite of their contributions to our community, are among the most housing insecure. The current council has put together focus groups with a cross-section of residents to look at how the city should utilize tax increment financing (TIFs). The current council has passed inclusion-

ary zoning ordinance in the Riverfront Crossing Zone to mandate low income housing as part of the overall development. The current council is targeting affordable housing on future TIFs. The current council is acting on the mandate of the majority of voters who cast their ballots in the last election, and the broad coalition of low-income residents and concerned community members who are continuing to organize for real solutions to Iowa City's affordable housing crisis.

What a difference a year makes.
What a difference local elections

make. That's what this article is about. I've lived in Iowa City for almost 20 years and people have been talking about the "affordable housing" crisis ever since I can remember. 2016 is the first time I've actually seen anything tangible done about affordable housing. This is the first time I remember a real public debate about how to deal with affordable housing in our community. After decades of everyone agreeing there's a problem, we're finally debating the solutions.



-Jesse Case is the state political director for the Teamsters

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