

CITIZENS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF PLEASANT VALLEY



February 25, 2009

Citizens for the Preservation of Pleasant Valley (CPPV) is a recently formed non-profit citizen group in the Pleasant Valley area of Southern Washington County. Our mission is to preserve the historic and scenic qualities of the valley. Impacts on those qualities should be an important consideration in decisions made by the Washington County government.

The recent Herald Mail article “New 911 Center Startup Delayed” discussed the South County tower. As mentioned in the article, the County is considering purchasing an alternative, less visually intrusive, site for the tower. It should be noted that the original proposed location is very small and the tower would be very close to several residential properties. We applaud the county for pursuing better alternatives. However, perhaps of greatest concern for many citizens has been the issue of the Counties' accountability to citizens. Please allow me to give some examples.

Several CPPV members have filed a Public Information Act request with the County seeking information on how the contract for building the communications system was awarded. The County has chosen to not disclose several important items, claiming that it does not have to, due to the proprietary nature of the project. When did the details of how the County awards public money become proprietary?

In March 2008, instead of holding the public input meeting required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the County held a public “information” meeting, where residents were simply told how things would be. Our understanding is that the County needs to have a proper public input meeting in South County to properly fulfill the FCC requirements. Thus, the need to have a second meeting in South County is not due to switching to an alternate site, but is needed to properly fulfill FCC requirements. This compliance with the law would likely not be happening if it not for citizen activism.

The FCC also requires that builders of such towers demonstrate that there will be no unnecessary impact on historical sites. The County sent a letter to the State Historical Commission asking their opinion. We have been told that it is not uncommon for the severely understaffed Commission to not reply to such letters. However, upon receiving no reply, the County did not attempt to use the wonderful historical resources available in both Washington County and on the Internet. Instead, the County simply assumed that the tower would have no impact. The County is now aware of potentially effected National Heritage sites – due to citizen involvement.

In 2008, several citizens collected all of the publicly available tower related documents they could find and posted them on a web site. This enabled other interested citizens to find and read such public documents for themselves. In July 2008, I received a letter from the County Attorney accusing us of posting illegally attained internal County documents, and informing us that “the Sheriff has been informed.” We replied with a letter stating that we would gladly remove inappropriate documents if the County would let us know specifically which documents were inappropriate. The County did not specify a single document, so we still have them posted on our site.

Not everyone, or even a majority, of those in County government have been uncooperative. Some have been very helpful. For example, on 1/4/2009, CPPV sent a letter to both the Director of Public Works and the County Commissioners. In a public meeting held 1/13, Commissioner Aleshire stated that he received the letter and specifically asked the Director of Public Works to respond. Unfortunately, we have, thus far, not received even an acknowledgement to that letter.

I submit we should be willing to recognize that any government is made up of humans, and will always be imperfect. However, citizens have a right to expect both co-operation and honesty from government. Our County seems to have a mixed record in this regard. Thomas Jefferson once said "The price of democracy is eternal vigilance." CPPV looks forward to helping the Citizens of South County be the vigilant citizens Jefferson envisioned.

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