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Watchdog group aims to inform citizens via cyberspace

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FORKS TWP. -- A writer with the alias "Issei" dubbed township supervisors meetings the "Forks Reality Show" in one online journal entry.

Another posting titled "Double Intermission -- Double Pleasure," seemed to parody a meeting in which supervisors recessed for two private sessions.

"The show started with an intermission that simply aroused the audience," Issei typed. "Was this to be the show of all shows? The stars returned to the stage with no explanation. The audience was on the edge of their seats. The mystery deepened."

"Issei" is among hundreds of visitors to a Web log, or blog, created by the citizens group, Forks Action Committee.

The writer belongs to a short list of contributors to the site. When the Forks Action Committee launched its blog about a year ago, members pictured a forum where residents could vent or debate township issues.

Yet many visitors to the site have been inexplicably mute. Although 300 to 400 people each week browse the blog, only about a dozen post journal entries.

As a result, writers such as "Forks Snooper," "WeLoveForks" and "Rebel With a Cause" remain a small clique even as more people venture onto the site.

So the question becomes: "How do we graduate them from lurker to participant?" said Scott Gingold, one of several founders of the FAC.

In coming months, the group aims to coax bloggers from their shells, inform residents and even help a candidate's efforts to score a supervisor seat.

Filling in the blanks

The Forks Action Committee banded together about a year ago, partly because members were disappointed with the local media.

The committee wanted to give residents an alternative source of information, Gingold said.

Members created a Web site with meeting minutes and other information, Gingold said. The separate blog gives residents an anonymous voice without fear of ridicule or harassment, he said.

Although most of the action takes place in cyberspace, the FAC also sends mailings to about 70 residents and holds monthly meetings.

Members are diverse and have varied perspectives on the township, Gingold said. For example, Sue Kocsis, 51, lives on a 25-acre farm passed down through three generations and supports preserving open

space.

Frank Hawkinson, 73, moved to the township about 14 months ago from New Jersey and lives in an age-restricted community.

He said the rural character of Forks Township is disappearing before his eyes and he thought the FAC would be a good forum to express that concern.

Gingold, 47, is a longtime township resident and entrepreneur who runs an online market research company and a business consulting firm.

"Change is inevitable," he said. "We know that. We accept that. But there has to be responsible growth and there has to be a master plan."

Gretchen Gerstel, 72, is a retired teacher and former member of the township's planning commission and real estate committee.

"The intrigue in Forks Township makes the 'Da Vinci Code' read like a child's book," she said.

Getting political

Last winter, candidate hopefuls gathered in Arndt's Lutheran Church for a question-answer session complete with a moderator. The Forks Action Committee was searching for a supervisor candidate to support in May's primary election.

The committee created a questionnaire for interested residents and conducted interviews.

After grilling candidates, the committee picked C. David Howell, a retired attorney who lives on Paxinosa Road East, whom members felt lacked a personal agenda or conflict of interest.

He supports regional planning, the police department's efforts toward accreditation and conducting an assessment of the township's capital needs.

Howell ran unopposed on the Democratic ticket in last spring's primary. In November, he faces Republican candidate Leon Fisher, former township police chief, for a six-year seat on the board of supervisors.

The Forks Action Committee recently tried to stage a debate between the two candidates, but it fizzled when Fisher declined to participate, according to the FAC.

Fisher did not return a call seeking comment.

Outside perspective

As a watchdog group, the Forks Action Committee expects to win few popularity contests among township officials.

"None of us are standing by the mailbox waiting for a Christmas card," Gingold said.

Supervisor Bonnie Nicholas said she reads the blog from time to time, which includes parodies of township meetings.

"I think it's good to have people in the audience watching what you're doing and keeping an eye on things," she said. "I have nothing to hide, so it doesn't bother me."

Supervisors Chairman John Ackerman expressed mixed views about the group.

"I was told when they were formed that they were formed to supply information to the residents, but it seems as though they have gotten involved in politics and I don't think they should."

Gingold said the committee had always planned to recruit candidates for office.

Supervisor Henning Holmgaard said he does not know who the members of the Forks Action Committee are and has never visited the Web site.

"Personally, I've never looked at it because it's a waste of my time, from what I understand," he said.

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