

City attorney program helps neighborhoods

Byron Williams, columnist



Published in the *Oakland Tribune* February 14, 2008

Back in 2006, during Oakland City Attorney John Russo's unsuccessful bid to win the 16th District Assembly seat, I asked him: "Why would someone give up a safe political seat with no term limits, which has at best token opposition, that pays \$200,000 annually in order to run for an Assembly seat with term limits, against three other challengers that pays \$120,000?"

Russo assured me back then that he loved being city attorney. Not only was he honored to do it, but should he lose his race for the Assembly he would have no problem rolling up his sleeves and getting back to work at City Hall.

Nearly two years after Russo lost to Sandre Swanson in the 16th District Democratic primary race, I sat down with him again to find out if he had made good on his promise to roll up his sleeves and get back to work with the same vigor he had prior his defeat.

The average voter would be hard pressed to define the scope of the city attorney's office. Not true, however, for those living in some of Oakland's depressed neighborhoods. Many know firsthand what the city attorney can do.

The day-to-day matters of the office that must happen regardless of who is city attorney – the claims and lawsuits that must be defended, the issues for which the City Council may require legislation to be written or legal opinions rendered – most of this passes under the daily radar of the electorate.

But the city attorney's office also has its ear to the ground. When the foreclosure crisis began to rear its head in earnest, Russo took an early lead.

In October, hundreds of distressed homeowners attended a free Saturday morning workshop on how to prevent foreclosure. The city attorney's office also initiated a hot line in three languages with assistance for homeowners as well as renters in properties facing foreclosure.

But the contribution that Russo is proudest of is what he calls, "The Peace Corps meets Legal Aid."

The Neighborhood Law Corps program, now in its sixth year, which was a campaign promise Russo made when running for the office in 2002, is an example of government thinking outside the status quo box.

The concept of the Neighborhood Law Corps is to send attorneys into the community. Rather than telling members of the community what the city attorney office stands for, attorneys are asking community members, "What are the challenges that are creating the greatest obstacles?"

The program operates on the obvious but often overlooked community organizing principle that people who live within a community know that community best.

From the corner store that attracts anti-social loitering to a grandmother unable to control her grandchildren who are dealing drugs to an absentee landlord creating unlivable conditions, the Neighborhood Law Corps is there, with the backing of the city, to address issues that debilitate communities and serve as magnets for crime.

Moreover, at a time when first-year associates can command \$165,000 at a prestigious law firm in San Francisco, attorneys who work in the Neighborhood Law Corps serve a two-year stint with their salaries pegged to that of a first-year teacher.

The 24-month term prohibits attorneys from becoming part of the bureaucracy, keeping their focus on the needs of the community.

As Russo stated, "The attorneys are fresh out of law school, imbued with the passion of social justice. And they don't care whose toes they step on because they are not staying."

He adds, "They are here for two years and in their mind they're making a sacrifice so they want to get something done."

The success of the Neighborhood Law Corps has led to it being budgeted in the city's general fund, which should ensure ongoing sustainability. In 2006, the National League of Cities pronounced it the Most Innovative Program for cities with a population between 100,000 and 500,000. It is the only time Oakland has won this esteemed honor.

If it is possible to grab victory out of the jaws of defeat, Russo's Assembly loss may have been a triumph for Oakland.