

As I see it

By Ed Peterson, District 1

A story is told about the city council selection process in one of our small northeast Johnson County communities. The community is smaller than most homes associations, and the residents are professionals with busy lives. In every odd-numbered year, the city council seats must be filled, and council members who are retiring are expected to recruit at least one candidate to run in their place. The story concludes with this adage: Don't answer the dreaded knock on the door in January.

It is a quaint notion of government that citizens will step up and care for their community, but it has produced some outstanding leaders in Johnson County—leaders who shaped the rich community we enjoy today. These leaders served for decades, usually with no pay. Unlike their big-city counterparts, they governed both colorfully and well. Their stories are entertaining and enlightening, and certainly not constrained by strict adherence to the truth.

My first exposure to the mayors of Johnson County occurred when I was a young attorney working for the state's utility regulatory commission. It was 1981, natural gas prices had gone through the roof, and Stan Rose, then publisher of *The Sun*, had written a memo that stirred the entire community. I was dispatched to speak to the mayors, explaining that the gas prices were the result of federal deregulation and not the commission's fault. It was a rather dark winter night and the meeting occurred in the back of small restaurant.

As I began explaining that rising prices were the result of federal actions, one of the mayors interrupted: "Son, we've all got problems. What are you going to do about our gas bills?"

Succinct, direct, and to the point. I stayed on the defensive the rest of the night, and it was a long, chilly drive back to Topeka. I later learned that Gunnard Nelson, Lenexa's mayor, had posed the question, and that I wasn't the first to experience his withering cross-examination.

There was more freedom to act in the early years. As Al Tikwart, Westwood Hills mayor, put it: "When we needed to block off a street for sledding, we blocked off the street."

Al used his position to influence policy far and wide. On one occasion he reached the White House with a phone call in which he bypassed the switchboard by introducing himself as "the mayor of a small **KANSAS CITY.**"

Sylvester Powell, Mission's mayor, threatened to blockade Shawnee Mission Parkway unless the Olympic torch committee would agree to run the torch through downtown Mission. Shawnee Mission Parkway is a state highway, outside city jurisdiction, but no one knew when Sylvester was bluffing, so the torch detoured through downtown Mission.

When Fairway Mayor Neale Peterson (no relationship) was determined to build a city park, he personally negotiated with the property owner for the purchase of the park land and sealed the deal with a handshake. He then designed the amenities to the park and oversaw the construction process. The city had no planning commission or zoning board; the mayor ran interference for everything.

The political scene in northeast Johnson County changed noticeably this year when four new mayors were elected and one mayor passed away. One-half of the cities' top leadership positions changed hands, at a time when much is happening to rebuild the older part of the county.

The new mayors have many more tools at their disposal than their predecessors and a lot more community involvement, but their task is formidable: improving upon the sound communities built by the former mayors. Let's wish them well and hope that the spirit of their predecessors takes root in their efforts.

Ed.Peterson@jocogov.org; 913-715-0431