

STRENGTHENING OUR NEIGHBORHOODS

Strengthening our neighborhoods will be a principal focus of my attention if I am elected as your Braddock Supervisor. I am proud to say that I have built a proven record of building a stronger community through my civic association, and have led a community revitalization program that, among other successes, closed down boarding houses and reduced other complaints of zoning and property maintenance violations. As Supervisor, I will look at each issue from the standpoint of how it affects our neighborhoods and will focus my time and attention on activities that support and strengthen our neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Background

My civic background comes from service to my neighborhood: four years on the Board of Directors of the Kings Park Civic Association (KPCA), the last two and a half as president; two years as vice president of the Kings Park/Kings Glen PTA; and three seasons as a Braddock Road Youth Club (BRYC) softball coach. Two of our children attend Fairfax County schools. Another is in college, and the youngest in preschool. I understand the importance of families and strong neighborhoods.

Record of Success in Kings Park

In Kings Park, the KPCA recently completed a highly successful neighborhood revitalization program which I was privileged to lead. This program, entitled “The Kings Park Neighborhood Initiative,” was a pilot program under Supervisor Bulova’s Braddock District Revitalization Program. The Initiative focused on pursuing innovative approaches to property maintenance and neighborhood beautification issues, building community spirit, increasing civic engagement, and training neighborhood leaders. For its efforts, KPCA was awarded the 2008 Best of Braddock (B.O.B.) Award for Community Enhancement and Beautification by the

Braddock District Council, an organization representing approximately 200 civic and homeowners' associations in Braddock District. Supervisor Bulova selected me to receive the Community Champion Award for Braddock District, which was presented by Volunteer Fairfax in May 2008.

During my tenure as its President, KPCA increased its membership from 380 of the 1157 households in Kings Park to over 600 households in just the last two years. Thirty-six community members attended a Neighborhood College sponsored by Fairfax County, where they learned about county government, community building, zoning and property maintenance enforcement, police and firefighting efforts, and ethnic awareness. KPCA meeting attendance increased from an average of about 20 people to an average of over 60. At these meetings the neighborhood discussed important issues such as civic engagement, fixing up distressed properties, helping neighbors in need, enforcing zoning and property maintenance regulations, incorporating the increasingly-diverse population into neighborhood activities, and the redesign of the local County Park. The association drafted a community vision statement that is already serving as a model for other communities. A first-ever Community Potluck Dinner drew 550 attendees and prompted significant community attention. Streets sponsored block parties where neighbors got to know each other. In short, the neighborhood was awakened and energized.

Closing Boarding Houses and Enforcing County Codes

I recognize the importance of enforcing the County's zoning and property maintenance ordinances. We must close down boarding houses and clean up run-down and unkempt properties that are neighborhood eyesores. Much has been said about boarding houses, which plague the eastern end of Braddock District. County zoning regulations state that single-family homes and townhomes may be occupied in one of three ways: by family members who are

related by blood or marriage, with two boarders permitted; by four unrelated people; or by two single-parent families with up to four children between them. Some property owners violate these regulations by renting rooms to additional people, creating illegal boarding houses. These houses create significant health and safety problems for their occupants. For example, individual bedrooms may be constructed in basements and locked, without required fire escapes. Large numbers of strangers share baths and kitchens, creating the potential for conflict. These properties are often overcrowded, dirty, and in disrepair, and can generate significant parking and traffic problems. Most notably, landlords of illegal boarding houses turn an illegal profit at the expense of the health and safety of the occupants and by overburdening their neighbors. I will make shutting down illegal boarding houses one of my top priorities as your supervisor.

Illegal boarding houses are but one of many zoning and property maintenance issues facing our neighborhoods. Some residents violate the law by keeping vehicles on their lawns or piling their yards with trash, creating an eyesore and reducing the property values of their neighbors. Residents who refuse to cut their grass not only create eyesores but create nesting grounds for mosquitoes, rodents, and other pests. I understand the importance of dealing with these issues to keep our neighborhoods vibrant and attractive, and to keep up our property values.

An effective government is one that enforces its own laws. Complaints of violations of County zoning and property maintenance regulations, filed with the County, have doubled in the last two years. There were 3,700 complaints of zoning violations filed with the County in 2006, 5,400 in 2007, and by October 2008 the total had risen to 6,500 for the year. Yet, while the County has created much-heralded “strike teams” to deal with the worst offenders, it has not increased its zoning enforcement staff at all. In fact, some inspectors have been reassigned to

strike teams. I support doubling of the size of the County Zoning enforcement staff and cracking down on violators. Those who violated these ordinances should face increased fines. Strong code enforcement will protect our property values and our quality of life.

I am proud of the record of success we have achieved in this area. In Kings Park, the KPCA Neighborhood Initiative included significant efforts to teach the community the specifics of the zoning and property maintenance codes and to encourage voluntary compliance with these rules. Neighbors were encouraged to work with each other to bring neighbors into compliance. Complaints to the County were a final resort. The results were tremendous. While County-wide, code violation complaints filed with the County doubled in two years, those in Kings Park dropped. County officials credited the Kings Park Initiative with bucking the county trend. I will work with your neighborhoods in Braddock District to do the same.

Facing the Foreclosure Crisis

The foreclosure crisis presents Braddock District with similar challenges, and likewise requires new and innovative approaches. When banks and mortgage companies foreclose on properties, all too often they fail to maintain their new properties adequately. The grass grows high in violation of the County ordinance, and soon someone may break a window or otherwise vandalize the property. Unattended homes are a magnet for crime, and the eyesores created by these properties not only spoil neighbors' enjoyment of their own homes, but bring down the property values of all around them. Some banks and mortgage companies fail to winterize homes or cut off the power (including sump pumps) in the summer, which can lead to permanent water damage and mold, making a home unsellable. Sometimes the bank or mortgage company does not register title in its name. This conduct costs the County revenue from lost recordation fees and makes it difficult to track down the real owners of homes. I will work with civic and

homeowners' associations to track the maintenance of foreclosed homes, and pressure banks and mortgage companies to care for their properties and be good neighbors. Repeat offenders should not be permitted to do business with the County government.

Helping Neighborhoods Help Themselves

I promise I will bring the same energy and leadership that created this record of success in Kings Park to the approximately 200 other neighborhoods across Braddock District. I will be an active participant in the Braddock District Council, which unites and organizes the neighborhood organizations of the district. I will reach out to each civic and homeowners' association in the district, recognizing that each community has its own strengths, needs, and challenges, and that a one-size-fits-all approach to neighborhood issues would not be effective. I will support the County's Neighborhood College program, seek to bring further training to our community leaders, and assist each neighborhood in developing and implementing its own plans for neighborhood growth and enhancement.

Conclusion

Strengthening communities means government should work together with civic and homeowners' associations, non-profit groups, businesses, faith-based organizations, and interested citizens to find new and innovative approaches to the challenges faced by our neighborhoods. The County should not be Big Brother, dictating to neighborhoods how people should live their lives. Rather, the County should be a facilitator, bringing together interested parties in a positive way to help neighborhoods help themselves. The County should play its part by enforcing its laws and responding effectively to citizen concerns. As your supervisor, I pledge to do so.