

Environmental Board 1972

In the early 1970's, city leaders would begin to embark on a campaign to adopt stricter ordinances in order to combat blight and falling property values in the community. Homes in The Village were indeed aging and rental property was beginning to proliferate. In early 1972, under the auspices of first term Council member Stan Alexander, a special committee of citizens was convened to examine shortcomings in code enforcement; to recommend new legislation; and to find ways to beautify the community. The committee would become known as The Village Environmental Board.

Among those appointed, to serve on the committee was a local resident by the name of Emerson Hough. Hough was an intriguing character who had a discriminating eye when it came to code violations. One might not go as far as calling him an aristarch but that characterization would probably not be far from the mark. Not that a sharp eye in this field was necessarily a bad thing. Hough's outspokenness was undoubtedly one of the main reasons he was appointed to the committee. As his insurance agent, Councilman Alexander probably had personally heard enough of Hough's complaints to warrant his nomination for membership on the board.

Though his heart always seemed to be in the right place, Hough appeared to have a problem with consumption of intoxicating libations of unknown quantity and type but which clearly had a propensity to heighten his disaffection with property maintenance and other code violations. A frequent caller to City Hall, Hough became well known to city staffers by his familiar way of beginning his complaints: "Pardon my French but.." Having identified himself by this often slurred but distinctive predicate, Hough would proceed to deliver, in his unique patented and colorful way, a laundry list of code complaints.

Being that as it may, the creation of the Environmental Board, without a doubt, signified a monumental paradigm shift in city politics. The new "get tough" attitude would in due time lead to stricter parking ordinances and much stricter public nuisance provisions. The intensity of enforcement would be kicked up a notch or two as well. The city's current commitment to and emphasis on strict code enforcement can be traced directly back to this era and today remains one of the most important aspects of the Environmental Board's enduring legacy. On occasion, however, the board's approach to problems went a trifle overboard.

In May 1973, the Environmental Board embarked on a novel new initiative. The idea was to begin sending friendly reminders to residents of the community who seemed to be forgetful of their civic responsibility to be a good neighbor. Special postcards were printed for the campaign and the cards were soon mailed to a select but growing number of wayward residents in the community.

The crusade ran into trouble almost immediately. Recipients of the postcards did not take kindly to the anonymous reminders submitted by well-meaning members of the board. Agitated residents vociferously articulated their view that what they did or did not do at their homes was none of the board's business.

Stephen Reel, who at the time was a city management intern and Gene Bumpass' consigliere, recalled receiving calls from irate residents over the anonymous cards. "There were no phone numbers listed on the postcards and citizens vented their anger by calling the default number, namely that of the city manager's office. Staff was left to fend off numerous complaints generated by the contacts," said Reel.

News of the problems soon made their way to the City Council. Council member Alexander hastily called a meeting to establish guidelines and procedures for the board to follow. Enthusiasm for the Environmental Board, however, had already begun to wane and over the course of the next several years, the board quietly faded into the sunset.

It should be noted that before its demise, the Environmental Board successfully made one more important and long-term contribution to the community. Fulfilling one of its primary goals of enhancing the beauty of the city, the Environmental Board sponsored the community's first annual spring cleanup which took place in April 1974.

The first spring cleanup utilized two city trucks and relied on "volunteers" from city crews. These were the days before the landmark case of *Garcia Vs. the San Antonio Metropolitan Transit Authority* and the Fair Labor Standards Act had yet to be extended to cities. Yet while city workers were not under any overt pressure to volunteer their services, it might have been the safe thing to do and therefore many did.

Originally, intended to take place on a Saturday, organizers underestimated the magnitude of the task and the first ever spring cleanup had to be expanded to two days. The area south of Britton Road was picked up on Saturday while everything north of Britton Road was picked up the following day.

During the early years, citizen volunteers generously treated participating city workers and other volunteers to lunch on spring cleanup days. Over time, however, interest in this important support role faded and the effort became increasingly a solo act. As the volume of wastes generated increased over the years, the city enlisted the help of the county in providing the service. Today the event remains a joint city-county effort that continues to provide an invaluable, albeit costly, service to residents of The Village.