



Sunshine Week: Allen has knack as watchdog

RNA head works to keep gov't open

BY SCOTT BRODEN • SBRODEN@DNJ.COM • March 14, 2010

Observing government meetings might be like watching grass grow. Susan Allen, though, doesn't mind tending the tedious lawn care emerging from Rutherford County Commission events.

As the newly elected president of Rutherford Neighborhood Alliance, Allen pursues the RNA's goal of maintaining a transparent and ethical government by attending the monthly commission meetings and many of the committee gatherings, as well.

She comes with vigilant eyes, ears and voice, such as speaking to the commission about concerns on how tax dollars are spent on lawyers and many other issues.

"The individual citizens input and their government caring about the citizens input is paramount to good democracy," Allen said during an interview in the courtroom of the County Courthouse, the same place where the 21-member County Commission holds its meetings.

Allen's active role in watching over the commission is the reason The Daily News Journal has chosen the 64-year-old Murfreesboro resident as Rutherford County's Local Hero of Open Government. This recognition is in conjunction with Sunshine Week, a national media celebration of public access to government.

Allen earned praise in particular for her role leading the RNA's efforts to convince the commission last fall to re-examine its legal services agreement with County Attorney Jim Cope. The alliance had concerns the document gave Cope the authority to hire lawyers to represent the county without commission consent. Commissioners agreed and rescinded their vote to reconsider its contract with Cope sometime this spring. This will be done in conjunction with the commission updating the county attorney provisions in private act, which is the charter the county government has with the state.

"Everything I have done has been part of an RNA effort, and the individuals of the RNA are an extraordinary group of people who care about ethics and accountability and open government," said Allen, noting how the organization has about 100 supporters. "We have Republicans and Democrats and independents. We're strictly nonpartisan. That nonpartisanship is important because we want a wide-range of opinions."

An eight-year member of the RNA, Allen wrote guest columns in The Daily News Journal about the legal services agreement, spent time with fellow alliance members to craft proposals on a more transparent arrangement and presented them to commissioners, recalled Steve Schroeder, the RNA secretary and past president.

"She is very interested in the goals of the alliance," he said. "One of the main things she's interested in is ethics in government and openness. She cares about the community. She is intelligent. She's a very personable individual. I think the RNA provides her a venue to meld all those things into a form of community service."

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Schroeder noted how Allen wants to see more voters participating.

"In order for that to take place, we have to have access to government activities," Schroeder said. "She's a tremendous asset to the community. She has a lot of energy. The RNA is lucky to have her."

In addition to being active with an independent grass-roots organization, Allen has also served as one of the volunteers on the county's Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee. This group consists of various stakeholders who provide input to consultants working on a long-range land use plan for county areas outside city limits.

Allen accepted the committee appointment from County Mayor Ernest Burgess. Burgess has grown accustomed to her active role in examining his proposals and recommendations, such as the initial legal services agreement he negotiated and recommended before it was rescinded.

"Ms. Allen contributes to Rutherford County just as any other citizen who is interested in good government," Burgess said. "Any time we get input from citizens who carefully study issues and make suggestions, it has to improve the process. Open discussion is healthy in any organization, especially in government."

Allen and RNA members appreciate how the county gives residents a chance to speak for three minutes each at commission meetings, which is something the Murfreesboro City Council doesn't permit typically unless it's part of a public hearing on zoning or annexation.

"That dog won't hunt," Schroeder said.

RNA and its president also like how county officials provide full access to public records and their time — even if it means watching the grass grow at another government meeting.

"If we didn't have transparency in government, we wouldn't know why those elected in office make the decisions they make," Allen said. "We would have no basis for giving them our opinion. Transparency promotes accountability. Transparency encourages participation."

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