

Residents Contribute To Help Paper Keep Covering Greenbelt

By Kim Chappell
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Every Thursday evening a tiny, modest-looking newspaper is circulated through Greenbelt, its pages packed haphazardly with news of every sort of happening, from cookie-baking contests to controversial zoning hearings. Despite the paper's nondescript appearance, the stacks of it left at a local convenience store and in apartment building stairwells quickly disappear.

Many city residents consider the 48-year-old Greenbelt News Review, which is put out by an all-volunteer staff, the pulse of the community of 17,000. Those residents are turning out to support the paper at a time when financial difficulties have necessitated a fund drive to keep it afloat.

"The News Review is the glue that holds [city residents] together," said David Warner, 30, who delivered the News Review as a teenager. Warner said he made a donation to the paper last month.

"I can't afford to see the paper go," he said. "I can't get the information they provide anywhere else. The paper means a lot to Greenbelt."

The drive, which began in June, has reaped more than \$9,500 and prompted more than 74 residents to volunteer to work on the paper. A group called "Friends of the News Review" has been soliciting contributions door-to-door and through articles in the paper in hopes of reaching its \$15,000 goal.

About 9,800 free copies of the paper are distributed throughout the city each week. The paper currently has 47 staff members, but a small core of editors and reporters have kept the paper going during the past two decades.

"The News Review is what makes Greenbelt a nice place to live," said Del. Gerard F. Devlin (D-Greenbelt). "I couldn't imagine Greenbelt without the News Review. It's a remarkable institution."

"I think it's the most valuable institution we have in the city. I can't say enough good things about the News Review," said Thomas White, a City Council member for the past 12 years.

The paper's recent financial troubles stem from a lack of advertising revenue. The growing number of households in Greenbelt—8,136 in 1985 compared to 6,507 in 1970—has caused the paper to expand in news coverage and circulation, but advertising has not kept pace.

Previously, the paper's advertisements "just walked in the door," said Mary Lou Williamson, who has been News Review editor for the past 13 years. Only recently has the staff acquired an advertising sales representative. One of the goals of the drive is to acquire a volunteer ad sales staff as well as additional paper distributors and reporters.

The money raised from the drive will be put in a reserve fund for use in weeks when advertising revenue does not meet the cost of printing the paper, which averages more than \$100 a page. The paper averaged four to eight pages a few years ago, compared to 12 and 16 pages in recent months.

Greenbelt was built during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration as one of the country's first planned communities, and the first issue of the News Review—a mimeographed newsletter called the Greenbelt Cooperator—appeared on Nov. 24, 1937, just a few weeks after the first residents moved in. The paper has not missed an issue since, outliving several larger county newspapers.

Another fund-raising drive took place in 1959, when residents raised \$1,500 for the paper. But fund drives are not the only times residents have rallied in support of the paper. During the late 1960s, when the newspaper was sued for libel in a case that lasted four years and ended with U.S. Supreme Court

ruling in favor of the News Review, local residents began a Freedom of the Press Committee and collected more than \$30,000 to help meet legal expenses and pay the judgment in the event of a decision against the paper.

Elaine Skolnik, President of Greenbelt Cooperative Publishing Association Inc., the publishers of the News Review, has worked on the paper since 1955. Skolnik, 60, became president and has been overseeing the operations of the paper since her husband Alfred, who ran the paper for 18 years, died in 1977.

"He was the backbone of the paper," Skolnik said. "It was a sad period [after Alfred died]. But I felt I must carry the paper on for Al."

Williamson, 48, began working on the paper in 1962, as a way to become involved in the community. She said she sometimes works 40 hours a week at the paper and has stayed with it because "it's exciting."

"It's a fascination. And I feel good knowing I'm making a contribution to the community. In a way, a newspaper has as much power as a City Council member. Somebody once asked me to run for City Council and I said 'I don't need to. I work for the News Review,'" Williamson said. Several other members of the staff have also volunteered at the paper for more than 10 years.

Residents say the fund drive suc-



Writes Virginia Beauchamp, left, discusses story with Elaine Skolnik, president of the publishing company. Mary Lou Williamson, editor for 13 years, is in middle.

cesses and the newspaper's volunteerism embody the spirit of Greenbelt. One of the city's distinctive features is its cooperative businesses. In 1937 the federal government authorized a local cooperative to organize all commercial enterprises in Greenbelt. Many of the enterprises still exist today, including a grocery co-op, a cooperative gas station and a housing co-op called Greenbelt Homes Inc. that owns many of the homes in the original section of the city.

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