

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL
Thursday, July 16, 2009

ELECTION 2009

Raising the Bar on Good Government

BY CARISSA KATZ

A new political watchdog group, the East Hampton Group for Good Government, is hoping get out the vote among second-home owners and others who may not have paid attention to local elections in the past.

Rather than taking a side on the issues, the nonpartisan group aims to educate its membership about East Hampton affairs and to advocate for “a government that will bring fiscal responsibility, transparency, and accountability to the people of the Town of East Hampton,” according to its Web site, ehggg.org.

“East Hampton is as close to paradise as we’re ever going to find and that’s why people come here and that’s why people stay here for generations,” Steven Schwartz, a founder who lives in East Hampton, said Monday. With all East Hampton has going for it, it makes sense, he said, that its government should be more professional, more open, and more civil.

“It’s not about the issues, it’s about the process,” said Jeffrey Fisher of East Hampton Village, another founder. “It’s about getting people to care and to follow what’s going on and to vote.”

Members of the nonprofit organization, now a few hundred strong, have been meeting together since November to discuss current events in the town and hear a handful of speakers’ takes on the issues. “We wanted to offer something to people coming to the meetings,” Mr. Fisher said.

Bill Wilkinson, the Republican candidate for town supervisor, talked to the group in December. Ben Zwirn spoke in March, before the Democrats nominated him to run for supervisor. Suffolk County Legislator Jay Schneiderman, a former town supervisor, was the guest speaker last month, and on Saturday, the group has invited all candidates for town office to a private meet-the-candidates lawn party.

With the launch of its Web site this month, the Group for Good Government is hoping to attract more members and to keep them and other visitors to the site up to date on the latest news of the town. The minimum fee for membership is \$100, the founder’s fee is \$500, and people of all political stripes have been invited to join.

“We’re a new organization, and none of us has any experience in the political arena,” Mr. Fisher said. “Joining us is like voting for apple pie and motherhood. It has nothing to do with Democrat or Republican, abortion or gun control. . . . It’s about getting competent people involved in town government and making the job attractive to the right people.”

In Mr. Fisher’s kitchen on Monday, he and Mr. Schwartz talked about some of the town issues that seemed to grab the attention of people they know. Among them were the town’s decision to buy Dayton Island in Three Mile Harbor, the manner in which community preservation money is spent, the town’s deep fiscal troubles, the imposition of a fee for resident beach permits, the use of the de Menil houses for a new Town Hall, and the question of professionalism in town government.

There is “a lot of apathy” among many second-home owners, Mr. Fisher said. “There’s a sense of complacency. People come here and it’s their dream. People don’t want to pay any attention to what’s going on in the political arena.” The Group for Good Government wants to change that.

Laura Anker Grossman, an East Hampton School Board member, who was recently invited to be on the group’s executive committee, applauds that goal. “I think the divide that’s existed in the community between the people who live here year round and the people who are primarily summer folks is a very unhealthy divide,” Ms. Grossman said yesterday. “I’ve been involved in other activities trying to bring the entire diversity of the community together. . . . to recreate a sense of community and a sense of responsibility of all those groups to the community.”

“We’re a community of second-home owners and people who live here year round, and I think we have common interests in terms of what kind of government we have and what we want for the community,” Ms. Grossman said.

The group’s executive committee also includes two other members of the school board, James Amaden and Steven Talmage, as well as Charlie Whitmore, an advocate for community sports who has been active in a number of town issues over the years, Mr. Fisher, Mr. Schwartz, Jack Schatz, Ira Bezosa, and Munir Saltoun.

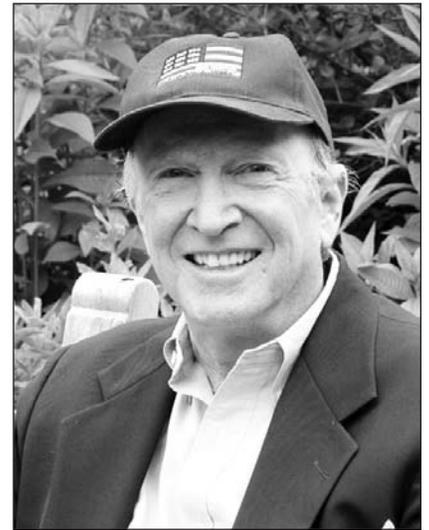
The group will not make political endorsements or donate money to individual candidates, but it will take a “straw vote” this fall asking its members who they would vote for and publish the results of that vote. It will also form a separate political action committee that Mr. Fisher said will remain dormant this year.

“Both parties have raised the bar on the quality of candidates they selected,” he said. However, if the PAC needs to “step in to action and seriously fund an opposition” to “another Bill McGintee” in the future, it will be ready, he said.

In the meantime, the Group for Good Government wants to promote the idea that candidates for office should have significant management or business experience or have a thorough knowledge of budgetary matters. It wants to explore the question of a hired, professional town manager. And it will insist on “transparent and civil governance.”

“We want to raise the bar so people doing the selection and the type of people selected come with more sophistication and more experience,” Mr. Fisher said.

On its Web site, it has already begun a voter registration drive encouraging second-home owners to reregister to vote in East Hampton, and it will continue that effort at post offices and golf and tennis clubs this summer.



Jeffrey Fisher

Carissa Katz