

CAN Do

Contributed by Jason Sanford (MtnX)
Friday, 13 June 2008

The group of concerned citizens that would grow into the influential Coalition of Asheville Neighborhoods organization first met in a living room 25 years ago to talk about the direction of Asheville. That group included residents Max Haner, Barbara Hodgson and Barber Melton—a Haw Creek resident and tireless organizer who will be honored during a Friday, June 13 dinner to mark CAN's silver anniversary.

"CAN started when there were some issues about building in the mountains and there was a just a real need to re-think our thoughts on how the community was to grow," Melton said in a recent interview. "We met and decided there's got to be a better way for neighborhoods to have our voice heard by combining our forces. The one thing we stressed was to make sure that you do your homework and be involved with city and county government to try to work with them. It kind of snowballed from there."

Indeed, over the years CAN grew into an organization with a prominent voice, taking tough stands on growth and development issues and forcing elected officials to listen—and often, bend. From the creation of parks to rules regarding sidewalks and signs, as well as any number of zoning regulations, CAN has been a strong proponent of community concerns, Melton said.

"Anytime there's something major, City Council looks to CAN to educate the public and get the word out," she said. "We're there because we love the community and we want to make it better. I think a lot of people see us as NIMBYS, but our main agenda is that the city, county and region all have to work together."

The secret to success, Melton said, is two-fold.

"You have to be tenacious. You also have to be willing to listen to the other side. I won't say I won't change my mind. I don't hold grudges. I'm willing to listen. But I want that same courtesy extended to me." And if it's not, Melton continued, "I'm going to fight you tooth and toenail. I won't back away. If the Lord's good to me, I'll be there with my walker, because I love this community and I'm trying to present a side that needs to be heard."

And the work never seems to end: years of debate over the Staples sign on Merrimon Avenue and Greenlife Grocery's zoning; Unified Development Ordinance changes; stormwater and mountainside-development issues. Meanwhile, CAN is reaching out to county residents dealing with growth and development concerns, while also focusing on increasing affordable housing in the area and getting low-income and public-housing communities organized.

"We hope that we have another 25 years to shape this community for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren," she said.

Melton, 66, will be the recipient of both a roast and friendly recognition at the upcoming dinner, said Chris Pelly, immediate past president of the organization.

"She is one of the folks who was there at the beginning who saw the need to communicate at the neighborhood level," Pelly said. "She has been there the entire time, and there's not much of a pat on the back for that sort of role, so we're honoring that."

CAN's celebration takes place June 13, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., at St. John's Episcopal Church, 290 Old Haw Creek Road. State Rep. Susan Fisher will be the keynote speaker. Dinner is from Laurey's Catering. The event is open to the public and costs \$15 per person.