

A tea party is brewing in Westlake

By Dave Lieber
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Half the town of Westlake arose this week to decry the loathsome actions of the Board of Aldermen. One hundred and twenty-five residents protested in a signed petition, and many of the signers attended Wednesday night's meeting to shout down the aldermen in what may have been the most contentious meeting in the town's 41-year history.

The reaction of the aldermen to this grassroots protest?

Stunningly, there was no reaction.

The four aldermen -- the four who are fighting to eject the Stagecoach Hills subdivision from the town, who segregated the early-voting ballots into two ballot boxes, who are seeking to remove Mayor Scott Bradley from office -- pushed on in their quest to unravel the town for reasons understandable only to them.

Residents have protested before. But with the crucial municipal election at the fore, these residents have organized into a group called Westlake First. And they are pushing their candidates with a vengeance once thought impossible for this exclusive town.

The petition bearing 125 signatures -- five times the number of voters in last year's municipal election -- called for a halt of the aldermen's attempt to remove Bradley from office; a stop to negotiations that could lead to an agreement with Ross Perot Jr., the town's largest landowner, on powerful development rights to his Circle T Ranch before the May 3 election; and an end to paying town money to lawyers "attempting to subvert the free-election process."

After presenting their petition, the residents stood in an ovation of support for their mayor.

But the four aldermen's nonreaction to the petition was most telling.

"None of them made eye contact," said resident David Brown, the petition's presenter. "They just looked down.

"We couldn't tell if they were ashamed or if they were haughty. It was like the whole group of us didn't exist."

The four aldermen didn't save their nonreaction only for the residents.

They also did their best to sidestep a Tarrant County judge's order issued Wednesday to take no immediate action to remove Bradley from office.

"I ask you now to withdraw the motion," Bradley said Wednesday night, giving the aldermen one last chance to follow the judge's instructions. "You can withdraw it."

"No, I want to vote on it," Alderman Al Oien declared.

"Move the question," Alderman Carroll Huntress insisted.

"We're ready for a vote," Oien repeated.

Alderman Fred Held, the lone negative voter, warned, "It's going against the wishes of the judge."

The subsequent 4-1 vote -- with Oien and Huntress joined by Jerry Moore and Howard Dudley -- showed their disdain of the democratic process. Yes, the four aldermen added a phrase to their remove-Bradley resolution, saying that they were acting "within the constraints of the court order."

But the vote itself clearly proved otherwise.

On each of the residents' three petition requests, Brown stood on a point of order, demanding an explanation of the aldermen's position before they voted on a related motion.

Each time, the wishes of Brown and the 124 other petitioners went unanswered.

These are the same aldermen who swore in their oaths of office to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States and of this state, so help me God."

Aldermen, it's time for a civics lesson.

The U.S. Constitution states in the First Amendment of the blessed Bill of Rights that citizens have the right "to petition the government for redress of grievances."

The Texas Constitution states in Article I of its Bill of Rights: "All political power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority, and instituted for their benefit."

You don't have to vote their way, but at the very least you should acknowledge the existence of the people who elected you. It's the American way.

Bravo to Westlake's residents for trying to take back their town on the eve of a crucial municipal election.

"It was a community rising up to petition its government," Bradley said after the meeting. "It must have been a spirit like that which caused the Boston Tea Party."

Spirit is a good word to describe what's happening in Westlake.

It's a spirit these aldermen are pretending not to see.

How blind can they be?

Dave Lieber's Northeast Beat column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays in the Star-Telegram.
