

# The importance of community involvement

*By Joyce Techel | Posted: Friday, January 24, 2014 1:51 pm*

I am Joyce Techel, owner of Jay Tee Kennels, co-chair of the Community Action Project, board chair of MyValleySprings.com and a member of the Calaveras Planning Coalition. I have lived in Calaveras County since 1974. I wrote this column to share why I am an activist and why being involved in the community is so important.

The answer is simple. Decisions will be made about land use and resource development whether we, the people, participate or not. If we are not at the table, there is no accountability and powerful special interest groups are more likely to have free rein. Our elected officials and other decision makers will make better decisions if the public is present and engaged.

Before 1980, I had never attended a Calaveras County Board of Supervisors or Planning Commission meeting; I had never testified at a state-level committee hearing; I had never had my name in the newspaper; I had never hired an attorney; I had never joined anything but a dog-fanciers club; I had never devoted time every week to reading five newspapers; I had never read documents that were hundreds of pages; I had never served as part of a regional collaborative group to plan for an entire watershed; I had never spoken before hundreds of people; and I had never written a comment letter about a subdivision proposal.

So what changed? A remarkable character, Phil Cain, wandered up my driveway with his equally remarkable wife, Hazel. He was running for supervisor in a recall campaign. He was a rancher who had lived in Calaveras County since 1953. We had a conversation. He got my vote and he got me going.

I heard about Jeannie Simpson, whose ranch had been designated as a landfill site by the county. She found out about it when a family member called to ask if she was selling her ranch. Phil and I attended a meeting that had been called by members of the community to address the issue. There were about 20 of us when we started. At the end of 12 years, there were three of us, Phil, Hazel and me. But Jeannie still has her ranch, and the landfill was relocated to Milton.

Phil and I also pushed the county for a road impact mitigation fee for six years, at which point we agreed we needed to take legal action. We prevailed. The most recent RIM fee ending balance was \$8,074,563, which works as matching funds to help make the county eligible for much-needed state and federal dollars. Cain died before the county initiated the RIM fees, but I still hear his voice in my head.

“Document everything!” he would say. “When you gather people together at a meeting, don’t let them leave without giving them something to do! Rebut any

incorrect statement. If you don't, it stands! Don't knock your adversary down, knock him or her out!"

Cain may have gotten me started, but probably the most compelling reason I became involved in my community is that I love this county and this Sierra region. This is my home and I love my home. My home is not just my land. My home is Calaveras County. The people I know are my family. I am protective of my family and my home.

In 2005, I was asked to attend a small gathering to discuss the proposed Spring Valley subdivision near Valley Springs. The seven of us who met decided we needed more information, so we worked for months to find out what existed, what projects were proposed, what challenges we faced. This group became MyValleySprings.com.

MVS created and posted the first public map of current, proposed and future developments in the Valley Springs area. By 2007, the number of proposed units had grown to more than 4,000. Given the potential for growth, in 2008, MVS helped to secure grant funding for an update of the Valley Springs Community Plan. The update was completed in 2010 and waits to be incorporated into the county's General Plan.

After MVS formed, we were approached by Ward LaValley, who represented the Community Action Project, a program started by Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch to promote citizen participation in local government, especially the General Plan process. CAP has since evolved into a fiscally sponsored project of EPFW with its own governing committee. LaValley discovered that several community planning groups were already in existence throughout Calaveras County. What he had to do was pull us all together. Those previously isolated groups united behind 11 land use and development principles to become the Calaveras Planning Coalition, which is administered by CAP.

The CPC is where I met Tom Infusino, its facilitator. He is a land-use attorney, an expert on water law and the California Environmental Quality Act and a great teacher. Infusino held workshops for CPC members to teach us how to understand and comment on general plans, write comment letters on development projects, effectively work with county government, and maintain a positive demeanor in our interactions. CAP and the CPC have actively participated in every phase of the Calaveras County General Plan update since its inception in 2006. The CPC has turned ordinary citizens into effective advocates who are influencing local land use and resource planning.

Why doesn't everyone get involved? It's complicated. There are not many jobs in the county, so folks are commuting. If you leave home before daylight and don't get home until dark, you aren't going to be very interested in attending a meeting. Sometimes it takes an issue that hits close to home to get people to pay

attention, but you can't inspire a population that isn't informed. Not enough people read local newspapers, which are critical sources of information in small, rural counties.

An even more difficult question is, "How do we keep people involved?" We can do that with accomplishments and victories – not every time – but we need to feel we are taking and holding ground. And we have to go where the people are, and when we share our message, we must also listen.

I have never worked harder, learned so much, felt more effective or been this hopeful for the future of Calaveras County. If you're interested in getting involved, visit [calaverascap.com](http://calaverascap.com). You'll find a wealth of information and links to the CPC member groups. If you have questions or need help, contact us. We welcome new groups and individual associate members. Get acquainted with the CPC from 1 to 3 p.m. Monday, Feb. 3, at the Chesebrough Room, Calaveras County Library, 1299 Gold Hunter Road, San Andreas. I'll be there.

*Joyce Techel lives in Valley Springs, is the chair of MyValleySprings.com, co-chair of the Community Action Project and a member of the Calaveras Planning Coalition. Contact her at [kennelnut@att.net](mailto:kennelnut@att.net).*

[http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/opinion/article\\_51341334-8541-11e3-99a4-001a4bcf887a.html](http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/opinion/article_51341334-8541-11e3-99a4-001a4bcf887a.html)