

Grassroots groups look to flex political muscle



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Local activists in such areas as the environment and affordable housing are talking about teaming up more often to amplify their voices and magnify their clout.

They shared their views Monday at a growth forum sponsored by the Napa County Green Party. Eight panelists discussed topics including opposing the proposed Syar quarry expansion and protecting watershed forests.

This wasn't a debate with Syar representatives and others with dissenting opinions offering a counterpoint. Rather, it was a search for common ground among local, grassroots groups with interests that at first glance might seem diverse.

Napa County Green Party co-coordinator Alex Shantz credited as a model the recent Vision 2050 drive to bring together local environmental and neighborhood groups. Vision 2050 is a coalition of 14 groups, including Get a Grip on Growth, Save Rural Angwin and the local Sierra Club chapter.

“If we can build off that and find ways we can make more

connections with each other from our different communities, I think we have the potential of being unstoppable,” Shantz said.

More than 70 people attended the evening event at the Napa County Library.

Julio Soriano talked about affordable housing. He’s been involved with such local groups as Latinos Unidos Del Valle de Napa y Solano and Occupy Napa.

“A lot of people are commuting to work burning fossil fuels because they can’t afford to live here,” Soriano said. “That’s not just low-income immigrants, it’s students, it’s people like me, artists, people coming back from college ... if you work full-time, you have minimum wage, you can’t afford to live here.”

Limited land supply and legitimate environmental concerns are issues, Soriano said. But institutions are more willing to welcome hotels and wineries than push for housing, he said.

Lisa Lindsey, a trustee with the Napa County Board of Education, expressed concern about the proposed Watson Ranch development. Watson Ranch would bring 1,200 more homes and a town center development to American Canyon.

Lindsey said the new development would add more traffic to an already crowded Highway 29 unless reliever routes are built. Issues still need to be resolved and the developer is ready to break ground next year, she said.

“I’m sorry, I know you want more homes,” Lindsey said to Soriano, but added she isn’t certain the time is right for Watson Ranch.

Environmentalist Chris Malan said everyone lives in a watershed. She described how water runs from the ridges to seep into aquifers or runs into reservoirs and into the Napa River. As each drop journeys, pollutants and contaminants hitch a ride.

“It is imperative, it is essential, it is our survival to take care of our water sources,” she said.

St. Helena resident Geoff Ellsworth described a wine industry that he believes is turning to a business model that overemphasizes hospitality events. This creates what Ellsworth called a “binge tourism” that he sees as a problem.

Panelists Karen Garcia and Lowell Downey focused on downtown Napa. Garcia said she and others formed a group called Napa Local because of concerns about development there.

“We’re very concerned about the fate of our local, small, mom-and-pop businesses that have been here for many, many years and how they’re going to compete with these big boys coming in with all of their megabucks,” she said. Some cities have laws in place that help protect small businesses, she said.

Steven Booth and Julia Winiarski talked about the proposed Syar quarry expansion. The county Planning Commission

recently approved a 106-acre expansion and opponents have appealed the matter to the county Board of Supervisors.

Booth and Winiarski said Syar has yet to prove the need for an expansion with data. They expressed fear that a bigger quarry would increase the chances of contaminant-carrying dust drifting into local neighborhoods.

Some local groups are already making connections between their issues. Soriano and Latino Unidos joined the Syar expansion opposition, pressing the county to release all related documents in Spanish so Spanish-speaking residents living near the quarry can participate in the debate.

Shantz made it clear that Monday night's event was meant to be only a beginning.

"I really feel like in 2016, we have the potential of really significantly shifting the political landscape of Napa County," he said.