

Forum tackles town issues

By Bill Fonda/ bfonda@cnc.com

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Harry Herrick got a crash course in Orleans, going from washashore to first president of the Orleans Citizens Forum in practically no time flat.

"We had just moved here, maybe a year or so, and someone asked if I wanted to get involved," he said. "You learn an awful lot in a short period of time."

The group's first event was a discussion of preserving open space and the land bank in November 1998, and since then, the forum has tried to inform Orleans residents about important issues.

During its annual meeting, Tuesday, June 20, at 5 p.m. at Snow Library, the topic will be the impact of regional issues on Orleans and the speaker will be Cape Cod Times publisher Peter Meyer.

"He has been very involved with Cape Cod issues, and we're trying to relate the big picture to us," said the forum's current president, John Sargent.

The meeting is open to the public, and time for questions and answers will follow Meyer's presentation.

Over the years, the forum has tackled issues that include overdevelopment, the Community Preservation Act, health care and wastewater, the last of which Sargent suspects is "going to be on our agenda several more times." It tries to hold three forums per year, and also hosts candidates nights when there is a competitive race for selectmen.

The group also produces a thrice-yearly newsletter for members, The Observer.

"We want to be completely non-partisan," Sargent said. "We want an issue to be of importance to the whole town, not just one segment."

In October 2003, when the forum hosted a debate on the upcoming special Town Meeting vote to renovate or expand town hall, more than 150 people came to Orleans Elementary School to hear the arguments. Sargent said it was probably the best forum.

"We asked each side who they wanted to speak," he said. "People felt very strongly one way or the other. I don't think there were a lot of people on the fence."

Since there was no debate because Margie Fulcher ran unopposed for the board of selectmen this year, the most recent forum was in April, when town planner George Meservey, Orleans Chamber of Commerce executive director S. Kyle Hinkle and Nauset Regional School District Superintendent Michael Gradone discussed the future of Orleans.

Sargent said people were surprised to hear from Gradone that the district's enrollment decline is at its end.

"It's not a continual drop, like a lot of people think it is," he said.

The forum's board of directors decides on the topics, and Sargent said the group tries to have a diverse board so as to have different ideas.

"We've got a couple of young directors who look at issues completely different than I do," he said. "We spend a good part of each meeting talking about ideas that are going on and new things that come up."

Most of the forums are in Snow Library, where crowds of 125 to 140 usually pack the room. The forum on disaster preparation last October drew 200 to the middle

school auditorium, but the room looked mostly empty.

"If we had that at Snow Library, we would have had 50 to 60 people who couldn't get anywhere near it," Sargent said. "We'd like to find something in town that's a little bigger, but not a lot bigger."

Herrick is still a member of the forum and attends all the meetings. He said he's happy with the way the group has educated residents.

"The forums have been worthwhile, with very interesting subjects over the years," he said.