

Viewpoint

BY EILEEN E. PADBERG



LEADERSHIP

Election season is time to ponder what it means.

Given any thought lately to leadership – what it means? I can't help thinking about my own thirst for leadership, as we get closer to Election Day.

A dynamic region, Orange County, is facing many challenges – the lack of affordable housing; providing an infrastructure to support our growth, as well as an efficient transportation system; and school systems that are aging and grappling with a rapidly growing and diverse student body and lack of classroom space.

Where are the leaders who will provide solutions to these challenges? Over the years we have had notable activists who have taken on some of these issues yet few of us aspire to elected office or even corporate leadership. Why? Perhaps because we have cultivated a system that slaps down leadership for the sake of an argument or a philosophical difference.

The television series "West Wing" is popular not because of its star power, rather because people want to believe that government is about weighing options and making decisions that might be painful, but

worthy. And if these are the key elements of leadership, Orange County government is sorely lacking.

Consider, for example, the "no new taxes" mantra of our elected officials who extol this pledge with little concern for how cities and counties will pay for the simple needs of its citizens. "I have never voted to raise taxes" becomes a badge of honor. It's far too easy to vote no. What is difficult is finding ways to solve problems, righting social injustices and helping ensure that our residents are healthy and educated.

Another example: In several of our local cities, issues have been placed on the ballot for the voters to decide simply because our elected representatives – concerned more with re-election than stepping up to the plate and taking responsibility – cower from decision-making.

When will we, the voters, ask for more?

As I question what leadership means, I am reminded of a speech given by Robert Kennedy at the University of Capetown, South Africa in 1966. The message of that speech speaks to people of all political persuasions

Continued on page 19

PADBERG

Continued from page 16

and is truly inspiring:

"Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples builds a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

There are dangers to leadership and Kennedy went on to point out that "the first is that of futility – the belief that there is nothing one man or one woman can do against ills of the world; second is the danger of expedience – of those who say that the hopes and beliefs must bend before immediate necessities. And the third danger is timidity – few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their friends, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society – moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence."

Harper's Magazine Editor Lewis

Lapham makes the most poignant assertion about leadership, "Leadership consists not in degrees of technique but in traits of character; it requires moral rather than athletic or intellectual efforts, and it imposes on both leader and follower alike the burdens of self-restraint."

Why don't real leaders get elected? Do we elect people, hoping they grow into leadership? What are we doing to encourage leadership? When looking around for candidates to support, let's look for leaders – people who will tackle the problems of our county and find ways to help our citizens – and not be intimidated by them.

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power," Abraham Lincoln said. A quote worth pondering.

In this election year, the voters are starving for leadership – I'm still searching and starving... **OCM**

Eileen Padberg is a political consultant who specializes in government relations and political campaigns. Letters to the editor go to: Feedback@ocmetro.com.