

# The Star-Ledger

FINAL EDITION

WEEKEND SHORECAST

EVERYTHING SHORE AT NJ.COM/SHORE

COMPLETE FORECAST, PAGE 33

FRIDAY, JUNE 8, 2007

50 CENT

DDAY. Sunny to partly cloudy, humid. 79°- 86°



TOMORROW. Morning showers, then clearing, breezy. 76°- 84°



SUNDAY. Sunshine and patchy clouds. 68°- 77°

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## The crumbling building blocks of community

BY ARI KAPLAN

I recently attended the final meeting of the Wyoming Civic Association. The first organization of its kind in the town, founded in 1907, this organization has served what has become 800 families in the historic section of Millburn. The municipality was founded just 50 years before in 1857 and is celebrating its 150th anniversary tomorrow.

For the past century, Wyoming residents have been meeting under the auspices of this apolitical group to address community issues ranging from public school funding to deer management. Neighbors met one another and shared concerns about local issues. They exchanged insight on the improvement of their community. They lived.

With the changing definition of living, the need for a civic association has diminished.

People no longer have to speak to their neighbors to obtain information; it is available online.

They don't attend meetings to voice their concerns; they can e-mail their township officials.

And, of course, they just don't have the time.

With the generational shift consuming historic

towns like Millburn throughout the state and nation, there is no one to whom the torch can be passed. And, if the torch is not passed, the flame will no longer burn.

Workdays have become longer, distractions from personal interaction have become more plentiful and the responsibility to participate has been replaced by the vagaries of participation. Ironically, communities are not heard until they make their presence known. It is the great dilemma of modern grassroots movements.

Is Millburn unique or is the civic association a dying breed? In the same way that small retail shops are continuously eliminated by "big box" mega-stores, is genuine community involvement, often considered to be the essence of citizen government dating back to the founding fathers, also being replaced by a more pervasive force?

Pundits report that the key to victory in the 2008 presidential election is online, but what about the key to building a community and fixing cracks in the pavement in front of your home? In a society where all politics is local, it is perplexing that a primarily ar-

tificial form of political interaction is replacing its purer counterpart.

As a microcosmic example of the trend, the Wyoming Civic Association counts approximately 6 percent of the families in the neighborhood among its members, who pay \$15 a year. At any given meeting, a fraction of a percentage of those members attends. At the last one, there were six, including the four members of its executive board.

In its history, the association has addressed the Rahway River cleanup, hosted candidate nights during board of education and township committee campaigns and held annual welcoming parties for new neighbors. When issues arise, membership and activism spike. In a paradoxical twist, the death of the civic association is itself an issue, yet fair-weather activists have no drive to publicly mourn its passing.

In a society of individualism, one person cannot save an association. That duty belongs to those it serves. It belongs to the community. It belongs to us.

*Ari Kaplan is a lawyer and writer based in Millburn. He is producing a documentary about lawyers working with detainees at Guantánamo Bay and can be reached at [www.arikaplan.net](http://www.arikaplan.net).*