

ACORN gets residents into decision process

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certain issues to be raised and discussed publicly," said Tom Taylor, head of the city's public utilities department.

The group has become a distinct voice in Dallas. "Their input is considerable," said Gerry Henigsmann, assistant city manager.

"They are extremely well-versed on the issues. I may not always agree with their particular opinion. But that doesn't mean they haven't done their homework."

ACORN's voice also is being heard in state government and in the federal courts. For example:

- Last year the statewide organization was designated to represent other consumer groups as an intervenor at Southwestern Bell's rate hearing before the Public Utility Commission.

- As the result of an ACORN law suit, U.S. District Judge William Wayne Justice ordered that federal funds be withheld from the Texas Area 5 Health Systems Agency because its board lacked adequate representation from low and moderate income consumers.

- Another ACORN suit, filed last month, asks U.S. District Judge William M. Taylor to enjoin First Federal Savings and Loan Association of Dallas from "red-lining" or refusing to give home loans in certain areas of the city.

ACORN has been able to tackle complicated issues, such as utility rates, primarily because of the time-consuming research done by its four paid staff members. In fact, the group sometimes has been criticized for being too organized.

A year ago last summer, when ACORN members began appearing regularly at City Council members to discuss adult bookstores and utility rates, several City Council members demanded to know more about the organization.

ACORN members "would march in in cadence and then someone would read a statement he clearly couldn't have written," Councilman Dick Smith said. "You don't have homeowners' organizations that are just starting with buttons and leaflets. It was all just a little bit off — and one had the impression that there were people in the back.

"Since then, they have become a little more genuine in what they are doing. But they still have a very substantial credibility problem."

Mary Strickland is one ACORN member who said she writes her own speeches. "I graduated with honors from college," she said. "If you don't have money, you're supposed to be

dumb and stupid. That's where some of the criticism comes from."

Holt said about 40 percent of ACORN's members are senior citizens. About half are white; the rest are black and Mexican American, he said, and nearly all of them have incomes less than \$15,000 a year.

All pay dues of \$16 a year, although many pay theirs in monthly allotments and some pay only when they can, to join one of ACORN's 15 neighborhood groups in Dallas.

Those dues and some donations pay ACORN's operating expenses in Dallas, which will be about \$30,000 this year, Holt estimated. Included is about \$12,000 for "VISTA-level salaries" for the four staff members, he said. Most of the rest of the money is spent on rent-

ing office space and printing leaflets.

"Mainly, ACORN is people who want to have a voice in their neighborhood," said Mrs. Strickland. Some are just scared, she said, "because their utility bills are \$150 a month and their income is \$250 to \$300 a month."

ACORN neighborhood groups work as separate units as well as part of the city-wide organization. Last spring, for example, Mrs. Strickland's 135-member Vickery-Skillman neighborhood group became concerned that at least a dozen trees on Greenville would be cut down because of city street work. ACORN members met with city officials, and, Mrs. Strickland said, "We saved them all."

"ACORN's efforts increased our

awareness," said Don Richardson, an engineer in the City Public Works Department. "We made an extra effort to save a couple of trees."

Other ACORN groups take credit for getting the city to erect new stop signs and to tear down old buildings. They know how "to access the city," said Henigsmann.

Action is what ACORN is after, Holt said. "We're interested in bread and butter issues... We don't see ourselves as a measureable political machine in Dallas at this time. We do see ourselves as an important force in issues that are important to our people. I think we're firmly rooted, but we're still young as an organization."

Louise Archuleta didn't march in that

demonstration in front of the records building. Instead, she stood on the sidewalk, shouting over the roar of two lawnmowers, and engaged in a one-woman, non-stop monologue for the benefit of a newspaper reporter, a TV cameraman and anyone else who would listen.

"That bickering and fussing in that Commissioners Court is why the county is like it is," she said. "We're not just talking to be talking. We're sick and tired of being stole blind. They're fighting among themselves over our money."

Is a march in front of the records building an effective way to make changes in county policy?

"If it's not, we'll come up with something else," Mrs. Archuleta said.



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