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LOOSE ENDS: Signs, signs, everywhere there's signs

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By Pam Hersh



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It was primary election day, June 5, 7 p.m., an hour before the polls closed. People – wearing expressions of excited anticipation – queued up out the door and along the sides of the room. We were warned about the fire hazard of blocking the aisles.

However, no voting machines were in the room, no election district signs were outside, and no candidate vote-for-me signs were in the vicinity. The masses were clamoring not to vote, but to hear Gail Collins, author and New York Times op-ed columnist speaking in the Community Room of the Princeton Public Library. And her political focus was thousands of miles from Princeton. She gave an amusing account of what inspired her to write her latest book, *As Texas Goes ... How the Lone Star State Hijacked the American Agenda*. What a terrific sign of the times that our literate and literary community still holds the printed word in such high esteem.

A more discouraging sign of the times was that no such lines existed at the polling booths during the course of the day. This election seemed to bring out more signs than voters. The town was inundated with signs advertising the names of individuals running for different offices in the newly consolidated Princeton Council.

Even though for years Princeton Borough and Township had an unspoken agreement among candidates to eschew signs, nowadays signs have achieved a new status of visibility rather than invisibility. Their comeback was put on a fast track thanks to the consolidation vote in November 2011, when “vote yes/vote no” lawn signs were more ubiquitous than crab grass. In the recent primary election, the rationale for polluting the environment with signs was simply the “other guy” syndrome, i.e., if the other guy installed, then the unsigned candidate would be disadvantaged unless he/she embraced lawn signs as well.

“It is all about name recognition, getting the undecided vote,” said one political analyst. I was unable to contain my skepticism, so I conducted my own very unscientific poll of about a dozen grownups waiting in line to hear Gail Collins. I discovered that not a single individual voted on the basis of a sign. Two of the 10 people did not realize that the primary election was even taking place.

One person summarized my dissatisfaction about the signs perfectly: “I knew the names of the individuals running from all the signs in my neighborhood, but had no idea what anyone stood for. I did a little research and made up my mind. But the signs simply killed far too many trees,” he said.

I truly admired all the primary candidates for mayor and council. They worked exceedingly hard and ignored their personal lives for weeks. In addition each spent a lot of his/her own money to battle to be elected to an essentially volunteer job whose main prerequisite is an ability to catch the angst of annoyed, frustrated residents and to stay awake during long harangues at late-night meetings. However, I held no such admiration for the candidates’ signs, which I found not only annoying but also particularly pointless in Princeton – pointless as far as providing any useful information about the candidate or the election.

The signs all shared similar patriotic designs and cliché slogans about leadership, but they failed to lead even at the most basic level, such as by telling the residents to vote in the primary election.

If the environment has to be polluted with the paper lawn decorations, then the signs should at least be inscribed with voting information i.e., vote for Elmer Fudd on June 5, 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. www.njvoterinfo.org (Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University) or www.lwvnj.org (League of Women Voters of New Jersey). Both of these weblinks lead the reader to election information.

Perhaps I am so sign weary because this has been a particularly sign intense season in Princeton. Late spring/early summer is the height of the garage sale sign

season, as well as a plethora of special events – for fun and fundraising. And the sign count, like the pollen count, has been particularly high this season. A huge economic stimulus package for Princeton area sign manufacturers and installers occurred with the transformation of University Medical Center at Princeton to the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro. And finally, every year Princeton University Reunions weekend followed by graduation celebrations is a particularly fertile time for the reproduction of signs, both directional/informational.

But all of the above mentioned signs at least give me information, directions, event information or laughter – unlike the basic political candidate sign which just says someone's name. Repetition of a name does me no good, unless it is pinned onto a jacket at an event. But my beef is not with signs per se, but with those that convey no useful or amusing information.

I should have asked Gail Collins how Texas treats the issue of political signs. I have a feeling that no Texan would miss an opportunity to say "Don't Mess with Texas" on Texas-style signs with big wooden posts unlike Princeton's little lawn signs on spindly metal legs.

A longtime resident of Princeton, Pam Hersh is vice president for government community affairs with Princeton HealthCare System. She is a former managing editor of The Princeton Packet.



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