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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Participating in the democratic process

By Gloria Cohen
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Gloria Cohen is guest columnist.

I'd been invited by several environmental organizations (via dozens of annoying emails) to attend a City Council meeting to protest seismic testing and oil drilling on the coast of Charleston.

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I could think of better ways to spend my evening, but City Hall was a short walk away, I did support organizations with environment issues and I really wasn't busy, so why not?

Well, one good reason might be a feeling that I have little to no power politically. Most of us feel that way, that we are no longer in control of many things. Policy has been decided by others, more powerful than we the people. Why even bother?

These thoughts are disheartening to us all. But the possibility that my presence just might matter a tad bit spurred me on. I was going to see if fighting this oil thing might just be possible.

At City Hall, I joined a group waiting to enter the meeting chamber and, when the time came, took my seat next to a kindred soul. We actually bonded for the duration, and enjoyed wordlessly sharing our emotions during the debate. We seemed to smile and scowl at the same responses in the debate. This meeting about zoning, business and the like, turned out to be anything but boring, at least to us.

The format of council meetings call for a period of public participation, citizens commenting for or against issues on the agenda. People were given two minutes each to present their views to the council. Neither I nor my neighbor were speakers, merely observers. There was one speaker from the petroleum industry; the other speakers were against drilling.

After public participation, the council members spoke. There was a bloc that wanted to defer the vote because they felt they didn't have enough information about testing, drilling, etc. They felt dissenters were having a "knee-jerk reaction," voting from emotions rather than facts. But, deferring would have meant that the city had no opinion, because the resolution was needed by March 31.

Can we see where this is going? My neighbor and I shared nervous glances. No small bloc, it included F. Gary White Jr., Marvin D. Wagner, Aubry Alexander, Dean C. Riege and William A. Moody Jr.

Odd, I thought. These men are all saying the same thing. Now, this wasn't a pop quiz. Surely you had time to study this. And, as though on cue, Councilman William Dudley Gregorie tells members it's their responsibility to do the research. He said this with unwavering conviction. Use the Mayor's Sustainability Committee, available to all, to help make informed decisions, do research, protect the brand, he said.

My hero had to be Mayor Joe Riley, who talked about the dangers inherent in these operations, and ended saying, "Our coast is not for sale."

Applause isn't allowed, so my gray cells were mentally dancing a jig. Another hero, Councilman Perry K. Waring, putting all this to right with his take. One source he researched was Clemson University. New technology is the way to go, a solar field in Colleton Country, a turbine project at the Clemson Institute.

“Those are the things we should be incentivizing,” he said.

My new friend and I applauded with our nods of appreciation. We heard a few more, we-don't-have-enough-information mantras from the same crew, but it was starting to sound really hollow.

James Lewis Jr. strongly stated that on the other side (petroleum industry), one person was there. This meeting was advertised. Obviously, the opposing side was here with statistics, facts and reasoned thoughts.

Right on. I'm thinking the industry thought they had it in the bag. But my side is winning. The logic is with sustainability, not fossil fuels.

It finally came to a vote. The resolution won, though not unanimously. But something worked for me, and for all those groups including Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, Oceana, South Carolina Wildlife Federation, Charleston Waterkeeper and more.

It worked! It was real democracy in action and it renewed my political spirit, so dampened by the events of these past few years.

The meeting hadn't been as boring as I thought it would be, and for a bonus, we won. Maybe, with public participation, democracy works.

Gloria Cohen is a native New Yorker who lives in Charleston. She is a registered nurse with an interest in children, nutrition, literature and travel. She recently wrote a children's book called “Gubby's Gift.”

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