

# What's This CONA?

*Pinellas County's Council of Neighborhood Associations is small but powerful.*

**Text: Harold Rummel      Photos: Weaver Tripp**

IT'S a political group, but it won't let its people run for office.

It does research but has no staff.

It campaigns for reform, but has no posh budget — a scant \$165 a year runs it.

If you counted heads at one of its meetings, and every single member was there, you'd come up with a not-too-grand total of 33.

"I guess we really don't sound like a very impressive group," confesses Earnest R. Jacobsen, president of the Pinellas County Council of Neighborhood Associations, popularly known as "CONA."

In organization and financing it definitely doesn't sound like much. Otherwise, it sounds like plenty.

CONA has become, in fact, a rather powerful Pinellas political voice. It doesn't endorse candidates or allow its officers to seek political office, but it speaks out on important government issues — and when it speaks it often speaks quite loudly.

Consequently, most everyone has heard of CONA and a lot of people have formed some very decided opinions of the organization.

Mayor Herman Goldner, for instance, has chided it for too often being "against."

R. T. (Tex) Herr, a fiery fellow and a founding father of CONA, burns a little at the frequent suggestions that CONA is basically a negative force. "Just look at the record," he pleads.

Tex has a point. The record does show that CONA has more often been positive than negative, particularly in the perspective of time.

CONA took form as a concept, a unique one,

in the minds of a smattering of neighborhood civic leaders in St. Petersburg about 1955.

Two years later, the concept was put in writing — CONA was incorporated.

Basically, it's just what its name says, the "Council of Neighborhood Associations," an association of associations.

It's supposed to provide a single voice and force for the isolated neighborhood groups in citywide issues. It's a forum for discussion of localized and citywide problems. It's a place where information can be exchanged on common problems. And its committees are supposed to prove the problems.

Each "approved" neighborhood group — "social clubs" aren't admitted — pays \$15 a year dues and gets three votes in CONA.

To keep out all personal politics, the bylaws say, "Upon his announcement of candidacy for any governmental elective office, any delegate already seated shall be deemed to have resigned automatically."

CONA lost a president that way last year: Albert Portell tried for a City Council seat.

It didn't take CONA long to become a controversial group.

Many of its first stands were against things — it opposed and defeated plans to put a so-called "tin can" auditorium near Spa Beach and it opposed a move by then-Road Board Member Al Rogero to refinance the Sunshine Skyway.

The stands, especially on the auditorium, weren't popular with everyone at the time and CONA got labeled a "negative force."

Subsequent developments have cleared CONA on the auditorium issue. If the original second-rate auditorium had been built as

planned, St. Petersburg almost certainly wouldn't have first-class Bayfront Center.

And when Bayfront Center was built, CONA sponsored a contest to name it.

Most CONA issues haven't been so sensational — there's been a lot of tedious work on zoning ordinances, the city's subdivision ordinance, sanitary sewer financing, the need for a bigger police budget.

Gradually, it has solidified its position on a St. Petersburg base and now it's working to expand. Last October, the St. Petersburg group reincorporated as a countywide organization.

So far it hasn't enlisted any civic associations outside St. Petersburg's limits, but at least four prospective memberships are being processed.

Meanwhile, a half-dozen or so other communities, mostly on the Suncoast, have seen St. Petersburg CONA's development and copied it and laid the base for "CONA of Florida."

CONA of Florida was formed officially about two years ago, and is almost a carbon copy of the original in St. Petersburg.

Instead of working to influence the city council or the county commission, CONA of Florida wants to lobby in the Legislature. Instead of exchanging information on just neighborhood problems, it talks about citywide and countywide and statewide issues.

Like the St. Petersburg CONA, Florida CONA is a low budget, research and reform group.

And its current president, St. Petersburg's Tex Herr, agrees with the observation of Jacobsen: "It doesn't sound very impressive." But it promises to give greater dimension to the little group of associations which banded together here almost 10 years ago. □

*CONA has come a long way since its first meeting in 1955. The original group met in a real estate office with a water cooler in the back row and a neon light flashing in the window. Twenty-three civic groups were represented. Meetings are more formal now.*

