

C.O.P.S. takes on City Hall

By E. D. Yoes Jr.

San Antonio

Some people grumble about city hall. C.O.P.S. does something about it.

Barely two years old, Communities Organized for Public Service has gone from nuisance to power in San Antonio. Its members do the unthinkable—publicly demand that city officials serve their needs as well as those of the special interests and the privileged. It is a mass movement, tightly organized. And it works.

If a banker's street has chuckholes in it, he calls the mayor or city manager and asserts his influence. It is quiet, but powerful. If a C.O.P.S. neighborhood street has chuckholes in it, members go to the city council meeting, the mayor's home, or wherever they must in order to assert their influence. It is noisy, but powerful. They go *en masse*, prepared with facts, and with all the visibility they can muster. Like the banker, they get their streets fixed.

Their intrusion into San Antonio's circle of power is not always well received, and their success has rankled some of those not used to dealing with "outsiders." Former San Antonio mayor Charles Becker, sometimes driven to the wall by C.O.P.S., blustered that "C.O.P.S. has dictated a no-growth policy [to the city of San Antonio] that would harelip every cow in Texas."

What has this group of plain citizens done to stir things up so? In just over two years, C.O.P.S.:

- got the city council to vote a six-month moratorium on more auto-wrecking yards in the Somerset Road area (which contains more junkyards than any section of town) over the vociferous objections of junkyard

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owners organized as the San Antonio Small Business Association, who vowed they'd never give the Catholic church another penny as long as it continued to support C.O.P.S.

- got the council, in 1975, to lower a proposed 30 percent rate hike by the City Water Board to 19 percent.

- this year, got the council to end the practice of giving home developers material for their on-site water mains. Also, to rule that, henceforth, CWB development funds will be used to provide "front end" money within city limits only, thereby ending one form of subsidy for development outside city boundaries.

- also spurred the council to rule that henceforth reimbursements of CWB development funds from the CWB general fund will be on a case-by-case basis, and not in annual lump sums. (Seems the development funds had been supposed to "revolve," but never did; it was a case of \$3.8 million expended by CWB, versus only \$1.2 million paid back by the developers.)

- last December, tactically and temporarily joined forces with Faye Sinkin's Aquifer Protection Association to deal resounding defeat, by referendum, to a zoning decision that would have permitted the biggest-yet shopping mall to be built smack dab over the aquifer recharge zone.

- most thrilling of all, shot completely out of the saddle a plan whereby the city would have spent \$1.3 million of its community development funds to purchase Pecan Valley golf course. The money was diverted to drainage improvements in southeast San Antonio.

And this is not a complete list of C.O.P.S. accomplishments, merely of its most clear-cut contributions to political instability. Viewed from the perspective of how much C.O.P.S. has attempted, or how much remains to be done, it seems a modest set of achievements. But it apparently sufficed to rouse real alarm in power circles of the Alamo City.

C.O.P.S. has long laundry list of demands and "action" projects, touching every social and economic friction point in town:

- * capital investment in drainage, parks, and paving,
- * an end to ill-conceived freeways which serve only to accelerate middle-class flight to the suburbs,
- * rehabilitation of blighted older areas through moderate and low-income housing loans and enforcement of ordinances or zoning against junkyards and other public nuisances,
- * no more overcrowded, dilapidated, inadequate schools,

- * equitable geographic distribution of city public libraries,

- * establishment of a full-scale junior college branch in the southwest part of the city,

- * equitable city-county school tax appraisal.

The organization is also closely monitoring City Public Service, the electric and gas utility. C.O.P.S. is one force that has helped stiffen spines in the city council against an out-of-court settlement of San Antonio's suit against Coastal States/Lo-Vaca Gathering Co., to the intense frustration of "practical" types like CPS board chairman Tom Berg.

To balance the tale of successes at city hall, one must note that C.O.P.S. made slower headway against the bureaucracy in the public schools. For a year, they got the old administrative run-around from San Antonio I.S.D. on such matters as the adoption of school bus safety standards or the decision to build a new, \$1.6 million administration building rather than refurbish decrepit classrooms.

So C.O.P.S. held a school board candidates' accountability night in March, at which eight people seeking two vacant places unanimously pledged themselves to support the organization's demands.

After the election, the new school board was notably more responsive to C.O.P.S. The members began to meet at night and in neighborhood schools and to hear citizens' presentations first, before voting on the issues concerned.

They also revoked, in effect, the midnight contract made by the old board for the new administration building, which got them sued for \$1.2 million by the contractor. The case was finally settled out of court for \$120,000. And they accepted a C.O.P.S. list of priorities for refurbishing rundown schools. Action chairperson Mrs. Linda Avena says C.O.P.S. has succeeded in reprogramming about \$200,000 for this purpose.

When did all this get started?

It is no accident that C.O.P.S.' principal achievements float on water. San Antonio—the old town, not the new, northwestward-ho part—lies in a bowl. When it rains, water runs in. When it stops, water stands. And stands. Especially in the south and west quadrants, where the majority of C.O.P.S. members live.

Most people date the formal birth of Communities Organized for Public Service from the big rains of the summer of 1974, when indignation against long-standing drainage grievances finally overflowed.

To attend that nighttime hearing of the city council on how to spend Revenue Sharing money was to hear it all.

C.O.P.S. had a turnout in the hundreds. When Andres Sarabia, the C.O.P.S. president, rose to present the general case that

RS funds should be used to meet drainage and other capital improvement needs of the older, neglected areas of the city, a dozen C.O.P.S. members stood behind him, waving signs that read: CERALVO STREET—A GREAT PLACE FOR FROGS; COME TO CERALVO STREET AND DROWN.

Sarabia said the city council should stop spending RS funds on "soft" projects (Family Services, the San Antonio Ballet Company, and the Salvation Army were also present to testify) and, for that matter, should meet capital expenditures with the regular municipal budget, rather than from windfall money.

Mrs. Beatrice Gallego, executive vice president of C.O.P.S., followed his impassioned words with clear, precise, unemotional remarks: C.O.P.S. sought no handouts; it simply wanted the services and programs which citizens in other Texas cities took for granted. But it had yet to see a focused plan of action by the council.

After her came a parade of 11 C.O.P.S. geographical area representatives, each asking for specific drainage projects, and reminding the council of unfulfilled past promises. It was a wretched litany of cracking plaster and stagnant, pestilential water, of home improvement loans "red-lined" by lending agencies on grounds of inadequate flood control, of stalled cars and wet-brake accidents preventing breadwinners from getting to work, of children obliged to wade through knee-deep streets to school or swept away and drowned in arroyos. They knew the exact designation numbers: "... the sixty-one series projects K, L, M, and N, for which \$3.5 million in bond money already exists . . ." Some of these projects had been put off as long as twenty-five, in some cases forty years.

"When a bond issue passes, you're not really voting for those specific items on that issue," Andres Sarabia said in an interview. "All you're voting for is that block of money." The city is not legally bound to spend it in the way described on the ballot, and the history of such bonds is one of developer pressure "reprogramming" actual capital expenditures.

C.O.P.S. has begun a little "reprogramming" of its own. It claims to have shaken loose more than \$70 million in drainage, street improvement and parks money from city hall. Not bad, for openers, but a long way from \$124 million "alternate budget" C.O.P.S. urged on the council for 1976.

Some things C.O.P.S. gets may look like pretty small potatoes to big-time spenders from other towns. Such as the new pedestrian bridge across the Missouri-Pacific tracks at South Zazamora and Frio City

They were chosen for their skill and vigor at organizing, and right now they stand as the cream of Catholic activists in San Antonio. The prospectus is quite blunt about leadership criteria. One must have:

- * time available for C.O.P.S. work,
- * concern for individual and community anger,
- * a following from her/his area or organization,
- * the ability to plan strategies for action,
- * a sense of the total C.O.P.S. organization,
- * the ability to organize other people into working for C.O.P.S., and
- * curiosity.

The last is not least. The prime tool of C.O.P.S. is research. On any issue, they learn where the power is, and they go there prepared.

It may start with being angry at a front yard full of stagnant water, but it proceeds through tedious clipping and filing of news stories, poring through stacks of files at the Planning Commission, Public Works, and county clerk's offices, and it ends with waiting half the day at city council meetings for a chance to ask the Impertinent Question, like the little boy who wanted to know Why The Emperor Wore No Clothes.

To play this game successfully, you need people who are or can learn to be like the late Saul Alinsky himself, of whom it was said: He cannot be bought, he cannot be intimidated, and he breaks all the rules. A man who took as his personal motto the remark of Don Marquis' Mehitabel the Cat, when she told her biographer, "Oh, Archie, the palaces I've been thrown out of!"

Alinsky's advice to a group of clergymen at a symposium on social change was succinct: "The only way to upset the power structure in your communities is to goad them, confuse them, irritate them, and, most of all, make them live by their own rules. If you make them live by their own rules, you'll destroy them."

Hence when City Water Board manager Robert Van Dyke tried to deny that CWB supplies water beyond S.A. city limits, Andres Sarabia recalls: "We just took [Van Dyke's] own study and showed it to him." To which the water manager responded: "Well, we *do* . . . with approach mains . . ."

It wasn't easy for middle-class Mexican-Americans, which most of C.O.P.S. leaders are, to set aside their traditional reserve, good manners, and deference to authority, break all the rules, and goad, irritate, and confuse the power structure.

IAF helped them learn to do this to such good effect that only months after the organization appeared, former City Manager Granata would complain of them: "If you don't give them the answer they want to hear, they won't let you answer."

Soon they were venting anger by publicly accusing Mayor Cockrell of going back on

her election campaign promises, denouncing the San Antonio ISD School Board as hypocritical, and labeling local junkyard owners "two-legged rats"—in reference to the four-legged variety that infest the 67 wrecking yards in C.O.P.S. neighborhoods.

They grew so good at irritating and goading public officials that John Shaefer, chairman of CWB, tried to have Mrs. Minnie Aleman arrested at one hearing. She stepped to the microphone to speak her piece, but an already-irritated Shaefer tried to deny any more time to a C.O.P.S. member. He tried, but failed. She refused to budge, even when he shouted at her.

C.O.P.S. descended on Austin in November of 1975, stepped to the microphone *en masse* at a Texas Water Quality Board hearing in the Sheraton-Crest Hotel, and so flustered Mr. Toole, presiding member, that he called a recess. He grew more flustered when they followed him into the hall with questions about rules on the Edwards Aquifer. He was more flustered still when he and TWQB chairman Hugh Yantis went to lunch, only to be accosted by C.O.P.S. members who crowded around their table to ask more questions.

It is a popular misconception that C.O.P.S. is an "underprivileged" group. Most C.O.P.S. leadership and rankers have regular jobs, stable community ties, and own homes in parts of town neglected when water mains, sewers, drains, libraries, and paving were being passed around. That's the sum and full extent of their under-privilege.

Precisely because they have jobs, however, many members can't turn out for day-time actions. This is handled by the C.O.P.S. minority who *are* underprivileged—welfare mothers of six who live in public housing, retirees surviving on fixed incomes by doing without air conditioning, adequate winter heating, and even food. And the good sisters, whose poverty is voluntary. These are the C.O.P.S. troops who show up early enough to claim virtually every seat in council chambers, with their lunch in a sack and the resolve to stay all day.

If C.O.P.S. would stand still for the label "underprivileged" to be applied, it could stand in line along with Family Planning, The San Antonio Ballet Society, and the Salvation Army to receive Charity.

This will not happen, thanks to Saul Alinsky's first rule: TO HELL WITH CHARITY. Alinsky's second rule is the basis for the departure of Ernie Cortez Jr.

Somebody organized the protest. Somebody had a plan. Somebody already knew, in 1974, that an outfit called Industrial Areas Foundation existed in Chicago. The somebody was Ernie.

Ernie Cortez grew up on the West Side. He attended the University of Texas and involved himself in organizing in Austin in the Sixties. For a while he was active with the United Farm Workers, but soon had a

falling-out with Cesar Chavez, whom he accused of concentrating on organizing losers. Ernie thought the way to change things was to organize winners.

Next, Ernie moved to Beaumont and did more organizing, perfecting tactics. Finally, he came back to San Antonio. He started walking around the neighborhoods, knocking on doors, asking questions like: how often is your garbage picked up? when it rains, how deep and how long does water stand in your street? did you know the dog waste that washes into your yard is a health hazard?

Cortez began seeking leaders, asking: who around here organizes the Friday night Bingo games at the church? who's most active in parochial school PTA? with the C.Y.O.? He began calling on these people, introducing himself, finding out what they felt, and outlining for them his plan.

He found what he was looking for. Andres Sarabia, the organization's president, is a computer programmer at Kelly AFB and was a leader in parish affairs. Beatrice Gallego, executive vice president, is a substitute school teacher and has been a PTA leader for 19 years. Ramon Castillo, an area vice president, not only was a parish activist but also had helped organize his church's choir. Not the kind of credentials that get one listed in *Who's Who*, but leadership strength nonetheless.

When C.O.P.S. burst upon the San Antonio scene in 1974, attention naturally focussed on its more flamboyant spokesmen, such as Father Benavides. But Ernie Cortez, staying carefully in the background, refusing interviews, insisting journalists talk with C.O.P.S. elected officers, remained the spark plug. "Father Benavides had been around the West Side for years," says one veteran reporter, "and all he had achieved was a small reputation as a firebrand. Not until Ernie came along did Fr. Benavides become identified with a successful effort to change."

Of course Ernie Cortez would deny all this—on principle—just as he would scoff at fears that his August 1st departure (to write a how-to-do-it book for other organizers, then join the staff of a community action project in East L.A., where Alinsky himself had his first successes) will cripple C.O.P.S.

C.O.P.S. no longer needs Ernie. The leadership is well-trained, experienced, and competent. Another IAF man, Arnie Graf, has replaced him.

Ernie Cortez is simply obeying Saul Alinsky's second rule: SHOW PEOPLE HOW THEY CAN MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS. THEN GET OUT.

This is the first half of a two-part article on C.O.P.S. In the next issue, Yoes will discuss the relationship of C.O.P.S. to the San Antonio media and briefly project the likely future of the organization.