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 harlep 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 owners.

(Continued on Page 3)
C.O.P.S. ...

(Continued from Page 1)

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 out of court a suit by the city council against a new set of court settlements of San Antonio's suit against Coastal States/La Vaca Gathering Co. to the intense frustration of "practical" types like C.O.P.S. board chairman Tom Berg.

• also spurred the council to rule that henceforth improvements of C.O.P.S. development funds to the C.W.B. general fund will be on a case-by-case basis, not in annual lump sums. (Seems the development funds had been supposed to "revolve," but never did; it was an act of $3.8 million expended by C.W.B., versus only $1.2 million paid back by the developer.)

• last December, tactically and temporarily joined forces with Faye Sinink'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 form a subsidy for development outside city boundaries.

• also proposed a plan whereby the city would provide water for their on-site water mains. Also, to rule out of court a suit by the city council against an out-of-court settlement of San Antonio's suit against Coastal States/La Vaca Gathering Co. to the intense frustration of "practical" types like C.O.P.S. 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 the 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 school 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 Aven 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-to-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 C.O.P.S. to the big rains of the summer of 1974, when inundation caused long-standing drainage grievances finally overflowed.

At that time, many people were on the 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 "soothing" 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 handcuffs; 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 reiterating the council's 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 on 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.

"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 in "real" projects 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 Zarzamora and Frio City.

November 12, 1976
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 needs,
- 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 Imperative Question, like the little boy who wanted to know Why the Emperor Wore No Clothes.

To play this game successfully, you need people who can 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 places 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, even when they shouted at her.

C.O.P.S. descended on Austin in November of 1975, stepped to the microphone as must 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 mark of Don Marquis’ Mehitabel the Cat, when she told her biographer: “Oh, Archie, the places I’ve been thrown out of!”

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.

Someone organized the protest. Someone 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? who’s 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 focused on its more flamboyant spokesman, such as Father Benvides. But Ernie Cortez, staying carefully in the background, refused to cooperate with C.O.P.S. elected officers, remained the spark plug. “Father Benvides 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. Benvides 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 book, for others to publish) would 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.

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