

**Cathy Becker**

**Climate Action Community Night**

Thursday, February 16, 2017

Grandview Heights Public Library

1st Ave, Columbus, Ohio 43212

This was the first in a series of community action nights being organized by Neil Waggoner of the Ohio Beyond Coal campaign of the Sierra Club. About 70 people showed up. Most of them were older, in the 55 and over crowd. The politics skewed heavily Democrat.

The room setup had everyone sitting at tables with five or six people per table. I actually knew two people at my table, one who volunteered last year with Sierra Club Central Ohio Group, and one I met on the Women's March in January. I also knew the person signing everyone in from a volunteer stint I did with Ohio Democratic Party in 2014.

We started the meeting discussing two questions:

- What issues concern you the most?
- What motivated you to come to this meeting?

At our table, the main issues of concern were resisting, obstructing, and impeaching Trump, worry over what will happen to the EPA, and the muzzling of scientific information that will prevent people from getting accurate information about important environmental concerns. Motivations for attending included to get involved, share ideas, show resistance, get more information about the Sierra Club, and discuss ways to educate Senator Rob Portman.

Our table was pretty typical in the room on these answers. Other issues of concern were:

- Throwing out the Paris climate agreement
- Pruitt as EPA administrator
- Dehumanizing refugees and immigrants
- Spreading of misinformation
- Polarization and division of the country
- Pipelines, especially Dakota Access and Rover
- Leasing of Wayne National Forest for fracking
- Attacks on the media

Neil made a couple of points about this discussion. First, at a time when the challenge to basic democracy is overwhelming, it helps to focus by spelling out exactly what we are fighting for. Second, all of these issues overlap. Environment, women's rights, immigrant rights all work together to form a broader movement. Third, this is a marathon, not a sprint. If we work together to do a few things each week, it can add up to have a great effect.

We then moved into the main activity for the night, which was to write hand-written letters to Senator Portman. Neil had been a legislative aide and knows how these offices work. The people who deal with a senator's constituents are his staff. They can ignore electronic petitions and even email, but they have to open and answer all hard copy letters. Handwritten letters are the most time consuming because they have to decipher the handwriting. The object of this exercise was to slow down functioning in Portman's office by sending hundreds of hand-written letters.

Each of us was asked to write three letters to Portman. One would be delivered in person to his district office in Columbus, one delivered in person to his office in Washington, DC, and one put into postal mail to his office in DC. This would ensure these letters all arrive at different times, getting the most bang for the buck for our efforts.

The letters were to cover three main points:

- Expressing our disappointment that Portman voted yes on a measure to do away with the Stream Protection Rule, which prohibited coal companies from dumping waste into rivers and streams.
- Asking Portman to vote no on confirming Scott Pruitt as head of the EPA. We were provided with talking points including that Pruitt has sued the EPA 14 times as attorney general of Oklahoma, that he has taken \$300,000 from the oil and gas industry. (Unfortunately Portman voted yes to confirm Pruitt the very next day, along with every other Republican and two Democrats.)
- Asking Portman not to support Neil Gorsuch for Supreme Court. Again we were given talking points, including that Gorsuch filed a supporting brief in a campaign finance case that gave billionaires the right to donate as much to political campaigns as they want.

We were to close the letter asking Portman to come back to Ohio to hold a town hall meeting. Although our letters were supposed to be a page, mine took up two entire pages, and I had to write it out three times! That left me with no time at the end of the meeting to make phone calls, but I had actually already called Portman earlier in the day to ask that he oppose Pruitt.

After the meeting I talked with Neil about busses to the Climate March in DC on April 29. He was talking about doing what the Sierra Club did for the climate march in New York City in 2014, which was to get busses for an overnight trip there and another overnight trip back. I told Neil I could not do another double overnight trip like that. The bus ride was excruciating, and I literally got into a car accident leaving the drop-off lot when we got back. I recommended that Neil talk to the travel company that ran the trip I did to the Women's March in Washington instead. That trip included an overnight in a hotel outside of DC. It was still a physically demanding trip, but not as completely impossible as the trip to NYC in 2014.