

Bitter civic club feud has no winners

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THE ISSUE:

Homosassa Learning Center dispute.

OUR OPINION:

Put the factionalism aside for the community's sake.

In August 2014, there was an air of excitement in Old Homosassa as members of the Homosassa Civic Club finalized preparations for the opening of the Homosassa Learning Center in the former Homosassa firehouse that had been given to the civic club by the Board of County Commissioners.

The driving force behind the civic club's creation of a center where children could enhance their reading and math skills and adults could continue their learning was Homosassa's venerable community activist Jim Bitter.

Shortly after his death last October, however, Bitter's legacy gift to the community, regrettably, became the focus of a bitter feud over the learning center's operations that has split the civic club into two factions.

On one side of the feud are supporters of Joanne Bartell, who was appointed as the learning center's executive director by Bitter when he chaired the civic club's learning center committee. On the other side of the feud is civic club president Terry Green and his followers who argue the learning center is underutilized.

According to Green, the catalyst for the feud occurred last spring when the learning center committee, ostensibly without the permission of the civic club, decided to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization for the purpose of making it easier to obtain grants.

Bartell disputes Green's claim and contends the crux of the feud is that Green and his followers desire to displace the learning center so that members of the civic club can claim the building for their own use.

Absent a formal lease detailing the terms and conditions of use, the feud has resulted in the learning center's locks being changed and Bartell being summarily ousted as its director with the added rebuke of trespassing charges if she attempts to again set foot on the site. In response, Bartell has raised the prospect of a possible lawsuit.

While both factions are good people at heart with good intentions, poor communications, perceived slights and mutual accusations have created a disruptive and corrosive environment that has undermined Jim Bitter's legacy gift. This has not only hurt the children and adults whom the civic club has labored so hard to serve, but quite possibly could place the future of both the learning center and club in jeopardy.

As such, the onus is on both the civic club's leadership and its members to put aside the factionalism and return their club's energies to serving the Homosassa community as it has done for over a half century.