

The Gualala Community Center is not a building

The Gualala Community Center is actually comprised of the people who come together to participate in the activities that have been created and sustained during the 71 years of its existence. The community, by way of volunteering its time, subsidizing via donations and contributions, and by showing up and participating, “votes” on what they believe is important. In the 30 years that I have been a Gualala community resident, I have seen a vibrant, ongoing, and amazing level of community camaraderie centered on what I believe are the four primary GCC activities that resonate with the local residents. I have taken to calling them “The Four Pillars” that make up our community outreach.

Of course, the use of the building and infrastructure for “one-off” community activities is very important. What we call “The Hall” is a large multi-purpose room that can be used by the community for a very broad assortment of activities varying from community meetings to celebrations such as weddings, retirement parties, quinceaneras, worship services, after school mentoring, etc. But today, I want to talk about the activities that reach out to the whole community – the four pillars – and why I believe they are embraced by the community.

In no particular order, but I will start off with Pay-n-Take because it is probably the largest interaction with members of the community. By my estimate, there are probably about 80 people involved in making Pay-n-Take what it is. Some infrequently and “as needed” like myself and some almost every day like Bill Matthews and David Fouts. The twice monthly sales are quite the community draw – partially because there is a certain mystery about what might be there, but also because a significant number of residents attend and there are sure to be a few people you have been meaning to catch up with. It is as much a social event as it is a “garage sale”.

But there is another very important aspect of Pay-n-Take. Between the approximately 80 individuals involved, there is a strong feeling of fellowship. This sense of belonging to something worthwhile while seeing friends and making new friends is exactly what the heart and soul of a community center should be. Such a thing is hard to create and easy to kill. Decisions should be made that enhance fellowship and contribute to a more efficient operation.

I also want to highlight one particular group at Pay-n-Take – the clothing store. I always thought of it as “just another department” like Furniture or Books. But when I donated 600 led tubes and light fixtures to redo all the lighting in the GCC buildings, I spent three days in clothing installing their new lighting. One day, a young man came in said that he had just gotten out of prison and that all he owned in the world was what he was wearing. I learned that there was a whole process in place to help the less fortunate and indigent. Nancy Howard handled it with grace and respect – helping him go through a prepared checklist of things he could have for free while letting him preserve his dignity. Another time, a single mother came

in and said she was going to be working on the day of Pay-n-Take and was there any way that she could buy some clothes for her little girl. The answer was “of course” and when she brought three outfits up to the counter to pay, the discussion was “This one, I have to charge you for, but you can take the other two for free”. When I left, I thought to myself that I have to figure out a way to better empower Nancy’s team, but shortly after that, everything burned. After the fire the clothing store moved to a rented space and is now open for sales on every Saturday.

The team has found a way to carry on, but it is much more difficult, involves longer hours, and ultimately is not sustainable to continue as is. Exhaustion and volunteer burnout are very real issues and need to be addressed. As far as I know, the clothing store is the single most impactful aspect of the GCC activities with regards to helping the less fortunate and most financially challenged members of our community. Many find the modestly priced clothing a massive help. Some might even call it a lifeline. Supporting this demographic is important to a meaningful GCC purpose and mission.

Moving on, pillar number two (in my opinion) is the activities of the Coastal Seniors group. One of the greatest risks as people age is that their world can shrink to a very small horizon centered on staying home. Particularly if they have lost a spouse. In the past, the Coastal Seniors have created an inviting environment for seniors to engage in a weekly luncheon and a monthly pasta dinner at the old GCC building. The more that seniors can get out amongst peers, the less likely they are to deteriorate unseen at home. This is another whole demographic that benefited from the old infrastructure and I personally believe that the GCC and its activities benefited from the relationship also. Many of our hale and hearty GCC volunteers are seniors and the greater the cross pollination between the groups, the more likely we will continue to have “recruits” for the other activities. I know there are some other higher-level issues to work out with the Coastal Seniors but we should at least be encouraging a return to the weekly lunch and once a month dinner rather than pushing them away.

Pillar three is our support for the Farmers Market. Since the first phase of construction doesn’t directly impact their activities, I am not going to say much other than the fact that the loss of the old building has resulted in there being insufficient restrooms available for the people attending and those working there. There is a community request that we consider some outdoor restrooms that could be unlocked and available during those Saturdays.

Pillar number four is going to take some explanation as why I view it as a pillar. It is the once-a-month sale of baked goods on the first Saturday of the month. Quite simply, it draws another completely different demographic that helps round out the cross section of community involvement. The team of bakers under Colby Bibb are affectionately referred to by my grandchildren as “The Baking Ladies” and they work all month in preparation for the week before the sale. That’s when the big push occurs to actually prep the hundreds of scones, cake slices, gluten free treats, and assorted goodies of all kinds. They even make dog treats and whimsical decorations for the children. Now that word has gotten around, they always sell out – no matter how many they make -- much to the chagrin of the South Coast Fire Department.

(In the early days of the sales, there would be times that they didn't sell out and the extras were then donated to the volunteer fire department.) Now they are making many, many more and they sell out earlier and earlier in the day. That is how I know for sure that they are drawing more and more of our community to attend.

I tend to do a lot on "instinct" or just "gut feel" and when the building burned, I felt it was imperative that the Baking Ladies be able to continue to see if such a sale was going to be successful. So, I built them a kitchen. Every couple of weeks I would ask Colby what I could do to make it better and easier for them to succeed. Finally, Colby said, "Stop, you have already created an environment for us that is more productive, more useful, and more enjoyable than what we had before the fire. We are good." So, I am going to hazard a guess that I probably know more of what they need than anyone on the rebuilding committee.

And yes, the new building will have a kitchen in order to service the activities in the Main Hall and to support catering, etc. and maybe (in the future) more ambitious goals could make use of the kitchen on that first Saturday of the month, but reading the FAQ on the GCC website shows a complete misunderstanding of how the bakers fulfill their mission today. The statements that the "café" is adjacent to the kitchen and is to be in service of their sales is a complete fallacy. They do not sell from the kitchen. They currently do not even turn on an oven on the day of the sale. In fact, if you could snap your fingers and the building as designed were to instantly appear, they would still be having to sell from the garage where they operate now.

At the beginning of the rebuilding process, the stakeholders from these four pillars were assured that the lost functionality supporting these activities would be replaced. I know that I don't know everything about the GCC and perhaps someone will feel there are other things that are more important. But if I look at what the community has "voted" for by the scope of their active volunteer base and the level of donations and participation, I find it unlikely that a majority of decision makers at the GCC would deem all four of these activities as worthless. I welcome a discussion about anything I have overlooked.

I also know that there are a lot of well intentioned people involved in the rebuilding process that are relying on the opinions of "experts". But what I can't understand is how you can be planning to build a seven-million-dollar structure without a single square foot devoted to any of these four very worthwhile (and in many cases long standing and well loved) GCC activities. Not one square foot is allocated towards these functions. Why are you surprised that a significant number of community members feel betrayed and angry?

Please help me understand what I need to say to get you to agree to change the design?

Ray Feeney