## **Lake Forest for Transparency**



## A Call for Civil Discourse Suzanne Sands

As a 25-year resident of Lake Forest, I have a growing concern about the way in which some in our community are approaching shared decision making and elections. We have a long and proud history of volunteerism and non-partisan leadership within our local government. For decades residents have focused on our shared values rather than those which divide us. As a result, our community has been a great place to live and raise a family. Lately, however, it would seem that the extremism impacting discourse across our nation has begun to take root in our community and is threatening to divide us. What is the endgame for a community divided?

Over the past several election cycles and with regard to a number of local issues the discourse has taken a decidedly us against them tone. It is challenging to find people willing to serve in our volunteer positions because they are concerned about becoming the next target. Volunteers are being considered to be pawns for one "side" of any given issue regardless of the complexity of the issues at hand. Complex decisions are being over-simplified. Factual information is often in short-supply. Language and tactics being used in campaigns and other communications are often aggressive rather than assertive, political rather than non-partisan, and personal rather than focusing on the issues at hand. Scrutiny and criticism are often filled with vitriol. There is frequently an underlying assumption that anyone and everyone has a hidden agenda that is self-serving. Trust seems to be in short supply, as does open-mindedness — a willingness to consider issues from multiple viewpoints. There seems to be less space for reasonable people with varying viewpoints to disagree and yet still collaborate toward consensus for the good of our community.

Recently, I read the book High Conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out by Amanda Ripley after hearing her speak at the 2022 Joint Annual Conference of the IASB, IASA, and IASBO. In it she states, "High conflict is different from the useful friction of healthy conflict. That's good conflict, and it's a force that pushes us to be better people. Good conflict is not the same thing as forgiveness—or unity. It can be stressful and heated, but our dignity remains intact. Good conflict does not collapse into caricature. These days, we need more good conflict, not less.

High conflict, by contrast, is what happens when conflict clarifies into a good-versus-evil kind of feud, the kind with an us and a them. High conflict is what incites people to lose their minds in ideological disputes, political feuds, or gang vendettas. The force that causes us to lie awake at

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night, obsessed by a conflict with a sibling, a co-worker, or a politician we've never met." I can't recommend this book highly enough as a guide for reflecting on how to better navigate community decision making in the context of differing viewpoints and opinions.

As we make our way to the next election, navigate the next community decision, find ourselves facing the next controversy or crisis - I would ask us all to consider . . . is this who we want to be? Is this the example we want to set for our young adults and children? Does Lake Forest win when we alienate, exclude, attack, and shut down meaningful dialogue and communication with one another?

Do we want to continue to support, allow, and bring the high conflict that is clearly not serving us well on the national or state level into our local governance and decision-making processes?

Is there another way? Can we evaluate candidates and decisions based on the factual information available instead of attention seeking sound-bytes? Are we willing to take the time to truly understand the complexity of the decisions being made? Can we value the service of our volunteers even when we disagree with their decisions? Can we hold decision makers accountable without attacking them personally? Can we agree to disagree? Can we allow for diverse viewpoints? Can we understand that just because a decision doesn't go our way, it doesn't mean our viewpoint wasn't genuinely heard and considered, but that it wasn't the most compelling or consensus viewpoint? Can we collaborate with people who have differing priorities because we share a value for our community?

I hope and believe we can because, in fact, we have a long history of doing so.