

Four Steps Toward Neighborhood Peace

by
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One of the realities of being human is that we have a unique ability to irritate one another.

While we depend on neighbors to borrow that cup of sugar or watch the kids for an hour, we also have different values, tastes in music, and ideas about lawn care.

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When dogs bark, neighborhood band practice keeps you up at night, or a fence encroaches on your property, consider this four-step

approach to neighborhood problem solving.

First talk to your neighbor. Banging on the wall, making threats, or talking to all the other neighbors about the conflict, may be the easiest first response, but it is not the one that will solve the problem.

Consider this 4 step approach to neighborhood problem solving.

Chances are that your neighbor is not even aware that you have a complaint. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you like to be told that your dog barks while you are at work, or that your television is too loud?

First, talk with the neighbor calmly and in person.

Try to resolve any differences by talking with the neighbor calmly and in person. If you

are uncomfortable with this approach, ask a friend to join you. A cooperative attitude and the ability to listen to what your neighbor has to say, will offer you a new perspective and perhaps a stronger relationship. A productive discussion is unlikely if you are spitting nails, so don't let the problem fester until you are angry. It will be easier to discuss differences if you have a relationship first. Say "hi" in the hallway or across the fence, share garden produce, lend tools.

Second, look into the cultural and legal aspects of the problem. The city of Concord, California suggests, "if talking to your neighbor does not solve the problem, do some research into the issue. The problem could simply reflect cultural differences of which you may not be aware.

Second, look into the cultural and legal aspects of the problem.

While this may not make the matter go away, you will be more sensitive to the cause of the situation, and more understanding of your neighbor. Usually, a little information can make us more tolerant."¹

Sometimes whatever is annoying us is against the law. Helena City Codes prohibit someone from piling junk on their lawn or allowing their dog to poop on your property. While it is useful

to know your legal rights, throwing the book at your neighbor will be a temporary solution. A court case or a visit from the police or Animal Control might prove your neighbor wrong, but will not provide a long term solution. Use this only as a last resort. You still have to live next to each other.

Third, if the problem continues, make your request in writing.

request in writing, with a non-threatening letter. Carefully outline the situation and suggest possible solutions to the problem. If you learn that the matter violates city law, say so in your letter. List steps you are willing to take to contribute to a solution.

Instead, if the problem continues, make your

Fourth, if your best attempts to communicate are going nowhere, find a third party to mediate the discussion. A trusted neighbor, a minister or a trained mediator, can all help moderate the discussion.

Fourth, find a third party to mediate.

Helena could adopt a program like Albuquerque, New Mexico, which has a city sponsored mediation program that helps solve community disputes. Assistant City Attorney Shannon Watson, manages almost 40 volunteer mediators at an annual cost of \$2,000. This program saves money by helping neighbors solve problems before calling the authorities or going to Metro Court.

"We often find that if people can come to an agreement in mediation, those agreements are more durable and last longer because those people are invested in making the agreement work," said Watson.²

It may seem impossible that your obnoxious neighbors will be willing to mediate.

The reality is that few people are truly unreasonable and want to continue the same battle year after year. A mediator helps the parties listen to one another, understand each other's

perspective, and helps them create their own best solution.

Mediation explores more options, more creatively, with the greatest

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control of the solution. A third party will help participants get unstuck from their positions, allowing more brain space for problem solving.

The next time a barking dog interrupts your peace, or a neighbor parks their car or trash can in your way, take the earliest opportunity to have a reasonable discussion. If that doesn't work, learn your legal rights.

If the problem persists, communicate by letter. If you

Neighborhood problems are best solved by neighbors.

are still not successful, try mediation. Contact the city authorities only in an emergency or after you have exhausted all other options. Neighborhood problems are best solved by neighbors.

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Sources:

¹Concord, California web site <http://www.ci.concord.ca.us/living/neighborhood.htm>

²*Albuquerque Tribune* "Albuquerque mediation service helps solve neighborly disputes" by Maggie Ybarra January 15, 2008

To find city ordinances, Google "Helena City Codes" and follow the links on the Sterling Codifiers website