

Dec 93

The Mailing List Quandary

*A Proposal by Mike Stubblefield and Jack Valinski to fix up and maintain the mailing list for
the Gay / Lesbian Political Caucus of Houston*

Foreword

When the Houston Gay Political Caucus was formed in 1975, no one had an idea that it would last as long as it has. Furthermore, no one could have foreseen the future as well as Don Hrochovy did then. Don created a mailing list by hanging out at bars, bath houses, private parties, adult bookstores, restaurants, organizations, meetings, in short, anywhere there were to be gay and lesbian people, you would see Don with his note pad writing down names, addresses, and phone numbers. This began what is now known as the caucus's mailing list. Personal computers were not a reality in 1975. In fact, the first caucus mailing lists were run by liberating time on the county's mainframe computer systems. Since Don worked for the county as a computer systems analyst, he had carte-blanche access to the computers. For many years, we would go down to the county offices after hours and load the punched computer cards into readers so our mailing list could be run. Finally, the personal computer came of age and Don bought two. Up until his death in 1988, he and a host of volunteers maintained the list and kept it in tip-top shape.

This proposal and anything we do in the area of list management cannot be done without remembering names like Don Hrochovy who began this whole process and saw into the future like none of us could. We remember the work he started as we present this proposal to you, the body of the caucus for consideration.

Sincerely,

*Mike Stubblefield
Jack Valinski*

Why Do We Need A Mailing List Anyway?

In 1975, no one could have guessed that the Houston Gay Political Caucus, now the Gay / Lesbian Political Caucus would last more than a few years. In fact, it is now one of the oldest organizations still in existence here in Houston. There are probably several reasons why we survive while other political organizations in our community last a couple of years then fade away.

Our leadership through the past years has steadily adhered to the principles of fairness and openness and concern that the organization survive through thick and thin. Our leadership has always had a direct concern that all bylaws be obeyed and meetings have order to them in the form of Robert's Rules.

There is one other reason our group has held together while others have not. We have one entity they don't. We have a mailing list of voters who are gay and lesbian. We can theoretically reach our people through the mail and if that isn't good enough, we can reach them on the telephone. The strength of a political organization that endorses candidates and makes recommendations is only as good as its communication with the people it wants to go to the polls. Our only asset really is our mailing list. It should be our pride and joy and should be the one thing we spend more time doing than endorsing candidates.

Toward the end of 1979, as the final year for the 1980 Presidential Elections drew near, a new organization popped up out of nowhere. This organization was spearheaded by Jerry Falwell, at that time an unknown Baptist Minister from Virginia. We remember the organization as "The Moral Majority." In retrospect, what made the Moral Majority so powerful was one and only one thing. Terry Dolan, (died mysteriously of cancer that later was to be diagnosed as AIDS) organized the mailing list system for Jerry Falwell. If it were not for the mailing list, Falwell would have been nothing more than another tele-evangelist. That list made him powerful because it put him in direct touch with people who wanted to hear his message and ultimately would do what he told them to, including giving large sums of money to aid the continuance of the work. Falwell mailing list and direct mail campaigns help win multiple battles for him in local, state and national elections. We all know how successful the Moral Majority and other organizations like them have been. The reason for their success is of course their aggressive direct mail campaign.

Our caucus needs a comprehensive plan of action for dealing with the mailing list. We have here just such a plan.

The Proposal

We have divided the proposal into 5 phases. Each of these phases will be completed in one calendar year from initiation. In other words, phase one will encompass the period from January, 1994 through January 1995. Phase two will begin January of 1995 and proceed through to January of 1996 and so on. Our five year plan would if approved begin on December 1, 1993 and proceed through January 1999. Each of the phases should clearly map out what we intend to do for the caucus and what the caucus is expected to do for us.

We decided on a five year commitment to this project in an aggressive and serious manner. We are asking for a five year vote of confidence from the body and board of this organization. In that time, we are asking the body of this organization to place its trust in us. We won't let you down. At the same time, we are asking that we not be let down either. In the past, this committee/group of people has been subject to the whims of whoever is president and or chair of the board and or whichever board member does not like one of us at the time. We are asking for a vote of confidence for the complete five year plan. During that time, except for obvious acts of nonfeasance or malfeasance, we are asking to be basically autonomous. We are asking for the president to appoint a chair of this committee / group that is seriously computer knowledgeable. The current recommendation for appointment is excellent, i.e. David Westerkamp. He is a knowledgeable and competent computer professional and one who we as computer professionals are comfortable working with.

Phase One

Phase one, beginning immediately is probably one of the most aggressive years of this project. In this year, the Caucus will buy its own computer and we will clean up the caucus list totally. We will in the first year of operation get the mailing list as close to 15,000 names good as we can - possibly going over 15,000. The magic number of 15,000 is where we were when Don Hrochovy died in 1988. I believe that by combining all the lists we currently have, we should be able to find a majority of these names that till now were no good due to moves. The Criss Cross tapes will be instrumental in helping locate persons and phone numbers, something the voter registration listing does not contain. We will also in the first year of operation be contacting other organizations around the city, state and country with the intent of sharing their and our lists to build up our Houston gay and lesbian contacts. Based on past interaction with some of these groups, this should be very painless. We want to by the end of the first year to have in place a structure whereby potential gay/lesbian couples (different names same address same sex) can be isolated and mail can be directed at them from the standpoint of membership in the organization. Additionally, the Criss Cross tapes can be used to find unregistered voters in the same areas and we can specifically tailor mail to them in the form of voter registration cards, door-to-door visits to personally register people to vote and incidentally get their name, address and phone number for our mailing list. This also serves the purpose of allowing the caucus to meet people on the street and find out what their impressions and feelings about the caucus are. It becomes a tool of self promotion without us even knowing it.

We will be adding fields to the mailing list. One field which will be particularly useful for the up-coming primary will indicate whether the individual voted in the 1991

primary. This info is derived by copying the voter registration rolls that you sign in on before you vote. We will propose that the first time we do this will start with the key concentration gay/lesbian precincts and work our way down. It will take some time for volunteers to scan the lists, but updating will be a painless and simple operation. This data is valuable to our endorsed candidates. It is also valuable to us.

The caucus mailing list will be converted to Foxbase/Pro. The reason for the conversion is very simple. Foxbase/Pro allows for the usage of what are called SQL extensions. SQL stands for Structured Query Language. It is a new item among databases which allows for extremely powerful sorts, searches, seeks and reports. It does to databases what microchips did to computers. Foxbase/Pro will allow us to search up entries by just about any criteria either in the database or in another database. It allows the combining of two or more databases for cross referencing the likes of which are too powerful to fully describe here. Suffice it to say that SQL allows us to do what we need to with mailing lists faster than we have ever been able to do in the past.

When Don Hrochovy died, he left two IBM PC/XT computers behind. These computers became the property of the caucus. Since then, they have been sold and the caucus effectively owns no computer of its own. If we are going to undertake this project, the caucus will purchase its own computer system of the specification listed below. We run Macintosh, not IBM. We do this because Mac is faster than IBM for the same money, easier to learn for first time users, i.e. most can be working in the system with about 10-15 minutes of training, and both Jack Valinski and Mike Stubblefield own Mac's of their own making the ability to share each other's work and post to the caucus's machine via modem easy and quick. Macintosh also makes for an easier environment due to it's realistic look and feel. We feel very comfortable using Mac to support this project for the next five years and we are hopeful you will agree.

Once the caucus has purchased a computer and 500 megabyte hard drive for itself, it will also need to purchase one for Mike/Jack. The Harris County Voter Registration listing takes up 300 megabytes of storage. When sorting the list, temporary files are created that consume the other 300 megs of storage. It will be essential for there to be a minimum of 500 megs available to support the Harris County Voter Listing, the caucus mailing list, and the Criss Cross database for Houston. This demand will probably grow but this should last the entirety of the first two years of use.

We have the ability to convert and translate 9 track 1/2" computer tape which all of these databases come delivered on. during the third year of operation, the caucus will purchase a 9 track tape system, but for now the conversions will be done at my office.

The Computer Specs

Apple Macintosh Centris 610 8/160	\$ 899.00
600 Meg Hard drive	\$ 625.00
Apple Regular Keyboard	\$ 89.00
Apple 14" Color Monitor	\$ 389.00
Apple Laserwriter Plus (used)	\$ 500.00
FAX Modem/Data Modem	\$ 239.00
600 Meg Hard drive for jack/mike	\$ 625.00
Foxbase Pro/Mac	\$ 278.00 **
Microsoft Word For Mac	\$ 299.00
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	\$ 3,943.00

For those who need to know, the Centris 610 is a 68040 based machine which is measured as currently being about the speed of a 486-33 on most applications. The Macintosh Operating System is already window oriented so no need to learn a complex or cryptic command line. We have included a modem so that updates done by Jack and Myself can be done effortlessly over the telephone. Entry to the computer is guarded by strong password control and no one that does not have the proper passwords can get in remotely.

We are proposing that the caucus conduct community fundraising operations specifically with the goal in mind of the purchase of this computer system above. We certainly do not recommend or advise depleting general funds for this capital expenditure.

Phase 2

During the calendar year of 1995, we will be again busy adding to the mailing list. To do this, we will be attempting to further use the criss cross tapes to identify and canvas precincts where we see some strength. In phase one, we started by encouraging the canvassing of high concentration gay / lesbian precincts. In phase two, we will also add a field to the database indicating voted in 1991 primary, voted in 1994 primary. As time permits, we will be developing more and more of these fields for caucus volunteers to make copies of the voter registration rolls for key precincts during the 1994 primary, by this time finished. The idea here being to build our list by tracking our voters. We will know their ours because they will be on our mailing list.

By the end of year two of our plan, we propose that there should be no problem with having between 20,000 and 25,000 good names on our database.

This is a work still in progress. Years 3,4, and 5 are currently being strategized, but you should be able to see that we are committed to seeing this task through to completion. If there are any questions, please feel free to contact me, Mike Stubblefield at 526-3425, or Jack Valinski at 529-1223.