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Opinion

Featured letter by Bill Haff, Ojai

The concept that corporations are people has made life more difficult in Ojai

The Ojai Valley has experienced a series of encounters with powerful outside forces in recent years. Each time, local residents have discovered how little control they have over public policies that directly affect their lives, and each example has highlighted the real nature of the relationship between large corporations and the public they supposedly serve.

The most recent example is the fight over AT&T's plan to erect a 65-foot cell tower in a residential neighborhood. As of this writing AT&T appears to be succumbing to massive public pressure and is changing its plans, but such happy outcomes are not always the norm. Other recent cases include the struggle to rid Ojai of the abusive Golden State Water Company; attempts to halt previously undisclosed and potentially dangerous oil industry drilling practices, at least until oversight protocols can be established; the fight over Southern California Edison's unilateral decision to install Smart Meters that emit constant EM signals in the

homes of customers; and local efforts in the statewide campaign to label genetically engineered foods, to give consumers the ability to make informed food choices. In each case industry has acted on the

assumption that the concerns of customers do not matter if those concerns might affect profits, and people have come to realize that when business interests become

entrenched enough there is seldom a way to exercise "consumer choice" in these matters.

One reform effort that will set the brakes on these abuses would amend the U.S. Constitution to de-

clare that corporations do not deserve Bill of Rights protections and are not "people," a legal designation corporations use to wield virtually unstoppable influence and avoid accountability for their actions. The

general public learned about "corporate personhood" because of the 2010 "Citizens United" case, but actually it has existed since the 19th century and it plays out in numerous

ways. None of the fights the people of Ojai have faced recently would have happened if corporations were not considered legal "persons," because the designation has led to a series of crippling legal precedents

that communities like Ojai can rarely challenge.

"Personhood" has allowed corporations to successfully claim that environmental regulations that hurt profits are actually illegal "government takings" under the Fifth Amendment. Corporations have also fought off community control over things like cell towers by arguing these controls are a violation of corporate 14th Amendment "equal protection" civil rights.

Readers are invited to learn more at the numerous websites hosted by groups working on this issue, and to consider joining the growing movement to amend the Constitution and reverse the corporate influence that has been increasing in this country for over 100 years. No other single reform among the many available to the activist-minded has the potential to eliminate more problems.

I am representing the Ojai Valley Chapter of Move To Amend (see www.movetoamend.org for more information).

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