

Bipartisanship is still alive – but it's hard work!

A column by Circle Pines Mayor Dave Bartholomay for the Quad Community Press Newspaper (9/11/2012)

In light of the nasty partisan nature of the Minnesota Legislature and the U.S. Congress, I'm often asked if I still believe that reasonable people can find solutions for the common good. It's a very tricky question because first you need to define 'reasonable' and 'common good'. I define reasonable as being fair, civil and open-minded in your discussions, and pursuing a broad set of goals and a longer-range perspective. Just saying 'no' to taxes without considering the consequences or being unwilling to eliminate government programs that aren't needed anymore isn't reasonable to me. 'Common good' means those elements that make a community work for all of us, that help provide all people with the opportunity to improve their lives. Great schools, affordable and accessible health care, well-maintained infrastructure and effective public services like police, fire, and libraries allow rich and poor alike to grow and benefit from their own hard work and talent.

So where can you find reasonable people working towards a common good? I suggest you look locally – your city, churches, nonprofit organizations, and schools. Places where there are often differences in how to meet the many needs and wants with limited budgets, but also places where most (but unfortunately not all) of the participants are willing to set aside the theatrics of anger and blame and instead focus positively on identifying mutually acceptable solutions.

Another example is the non-partisan Governor's Tax Reform Advisory Group. I'm proud to have been appointed to this group of 15 mayors from across the state who have spent the summer wrestling with how to improve the performance of a complex property tax system that is at the core of important local government funding. In the group are a few known Democrats and Republicans, but the rest of the group is like most locally elected folks that are not easily labeled as either party. Because it isn't about partisan politics, it's about good public policy. And this group is having intense and productive policy deliberations about how to reform the property tax structure to be more fair, transparent and efficient as it collects the dollars to provide necessary services like police, fire, streets and public works. What tax structure best reflects the economy of 2012 and beyond, not the 1970s? What supports job creation and business competitiveness? How do we best provide incentives for local governments to continue collaborating and sharing services? How do you invest in K-12 reform and strengthen schools so they can be globally, not just regionally, competitive? And what is the true need and ability to pay of varied communities all across the state, and what role do locally generated income and sales taxes play when they now go directly to state government?

Now I understand that some folks want to immediately jump to the end of any tax reform discussion – is it going to lower or increase my own taxes? But it's very important that we have the discipline to first look at the facts and figure out the best tax structure, and only then have the final hot discussion about how much revenue you need to raise to pay for the level of service you want to provide.

Working in a bipartisan or nonpartisan way is very hard and can be politically dangerous to the participants. I suppose what must seem like a permanent reelection campaign is much easier if you can always be counted on by your supporters to never exercise any independent judgment that might upset them. The trouble is that isn't real leadership, and, as we've seen, it doesn't produce real results.