

What if facts don't matter?

A column by Mayor Dave Bartholomay for the Quad Community Press Newspaper (8/10/10)

Our democracy is based on the concept that factual knowledge by citizens matters. Thomas Jefferson, in 1789, said “Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.” Yet an illuminating article titled ‘How Facts Backfire’ by Joe Keohane in the Boston Globe newspaper cites research by the University of Michigan that shows misinformed people, when confronted with solid facts, rarely change their minds and instead become even more set in their opinions.

As a Mayor, I’ve always believed that a well-intentioned but misinformed person, when confronted with facts, will be set straight. According to Keohane, we all believe our view of the world has been formed by careful, rational consideration of facts and ideas, and that our subsequent decisions are sound and intelligent. But the truth may be that instead we base our opinions on our emotions and beliefs and find it threatening to admit we are wrong. We may end up accepting incorrect, not factual, information because it fits in with and reinforces our long-held core principals and beliefs. And because too many of us do not tend to seek out new information sources or even listen with an open mind to differing viewpoints, we may very well be absolutely wrong, while at the same time even more certain that we are right!

And then the political process accentuates the problem by playing to our fears and emotions. And heaven help the politician who appreciates differing viewpoints and is open to learning more about an issue and subsequently changes his or her mind. Why, that’s not growth, that’s betrayal and a flip-flop! So each side becomes more and more certain of their ‘facts’, when in reality they’ve done an awfully poor job of independently searching for the truth and common ground. Trust in government drops, strict litmus tests and rigidity rises, and the country seems polarized as either ‘anti-Bush’ or ‘anti-Obama’. The campaign never ends as the losing side then views success as not letting anything move forward rather than promoting sound alternatives, all the while our country languishes and continues to slip in too many areas like education, energy, and fiscal soundness.

My concern over citizens being open to real facts and being able to grow and change also relates to an excellent book I’ve been reading titled ‘Community’ by Peter Block. Block’s focus is on building a stronger sense of community through more responsible citizens. Citizens should not simply be consumers of various agendas and messages at election time and the targets of folks peddling fear and retribution. Rather, Block believes citizens must be held responsible and accountable for their actions and the well-being of the overall community instead of delegating that to a ‘leader’. Block worries that many people want to define a problem, find fault, create fear, demand action, and then wait for a great leader to solve our problems. If the most recently elected leader can’t pull it off (almost guaranteed since the problems always keep coming and the opposition doesn’t help craft solutions), then we toss them out and get a ‘new’ leader who will face the same dilemma.

Folks like to harp about an issue being a ‘threat to our country’ or to our ‘way of life’. I believe the biggest threat to our democracy faces us when we look in the mirror each morning. You, yes You, are the key to a strong democracy here in our country: know your neighbors, be personally responsible and accountable for making your entire community a better place to live, and be truly open to facts and new ideas in a fast-changing world.