

## Civic Engagement – Practicing What I Preach

So, if ever you want to test the waters of engaging with your community, try undertaking a controversial project like a landfill. During the last eight to ten months, we in Cumberland County have gone through just that process, and I have been reminded at many points along the way of certain foundational principles that are so very important. Incidentally, they are some of the very same principles I have shared with (they would say preached to) my children through the years, and so I have found myself in the position of necessarily practicing what I have so frequently preached.

### 1. Keep it positive.

I have adopted the view that all civic engagement is positive. Even when you, your staff, or your elected officials – or all of you - are being yelled at or vilified (though I am sure I am assuming far too much as that never happens to you), remember that civic engagement is a good thing. After all, if citizens are looking over your shoulder, they are interested in what you are doing, and criticism can only make you better. Embrace it, because even when your civic engagement is relating to a positive topic – something the whole community supports – inevitably there will be disagreements about how to accomplish the agreed-upon goal. In my observation, just about everyone with whom I have engaged truly had the best interest of the community at heart and they were sharing ideas that they truly thought would help and work best. Let them have that, let them have their moment, and thank them for the feedback.

### 2. Stick to the issues.

This is something that you quickly learn as a lawyer: there is no room for digression to irrelevant matter. The court simply will not tolerate it. But it is not uncommon that discussions quickly get off track, and I have found when that happens, the conversation tends to become more emotional than fact-driven. Stick to the issues and the narrow set of decision points necessary to complete the task at hand. This will require a strong meeting leader, and in that capacity, do not hesitate to take control of the room.

### 3. Do not take anything personally.

This is another lesson learned from practicing law, and a skill keenly honed as a county administrator. This also is something more easily accomplished by following suggestion number two above: stick to the issues. Rarely when an upset citizen is unhappy is their ire truly about me or another county official. And even if it is, I have always told my children to allow classmates some latitude because we do not know what struggles they may have in other parts of their lives. We need to let a great deal of what people may say to or about us go unacknowledged other than to correct misinformation when doing so is helpful to the collective or productive to the conversation. Once again, I must practice what I have preached to my children.

4. Be grateful.

Be grateful that we live in a society where public engagement is possible. Be grateful that citizens in our communities have really good ideas, constructive feedback, and care enough about what we do to engage. Be grateful that we have jobs that afford us the opportunity to engage with our citizens and help our communities. And on any given day, be grateful that you were given the opportunity to just be there.

5. Smile.

I really do believe that smiling is contagious. And I believe that in addition to lightening the mood and setting a positive tone for any conversation, you will feel better too. But remember, your smile must be genuine, it must come from within, and it is shared through your eyes. After all, do we not have so very much to smile about!

Thank you for your public service. Keep engaging; enjoy it, learn from it, and grow from it; and smile!