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Graber, Robert

From: Paul Wolf <paulwolf2@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, May 16, 2013 11:08 PM
To: Graber, Robert
Subject: Where Are The New Ideas In Erie County Government?

Mr. Graber:

Please print and file the article below for the next Erie County Legislature meeting.

http://artvoice.com/issues/v12n19/commentary

Thanks

Paul Wolf
www.reinventinggov.org

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Where Are the New Ideas in Erie County Government?

by Paul Wolf, ReinventingGov.org

Newsweek magazine recently ran an article listing the five most innovative mayors in the US. It might not surprise you that none of the mayors from Western New York made the list.

I love this quote from the article:

> While Washington seems paralyzed by partisan bickering, America's mayors are busy putting ideas into action. City hall is increasingly a place for bold experimentation. Unlike Congress, there's no fiddling over the fiscal cliff or divisions into angry, ideological, debating societies. As communities climb out of the great recession, pragmatism is forcing innovation. Success requires strong leadership and a vision of politics as the art of what works.

While the above quote focuses on mayors, it can be applied to county executives and county legislators as well.

In putting together their list of the most innovative mayors in America, *Newsweek* considered the following items:

- turning ideas into action;
- pushing for bold experimentation;
- undertaking pragmatic innovation;
- displaying strong leadership;
- and putting forth a vision of politics as the art of what works.

Recently I contacted County Executive Mark Poloncarz and asked him if he could provide me examples of the above for his first year in office. A representative from his office forwarded to me a list of accomplishments that included the following items :

- restored funding for rodent control and youth programs;

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- increased funding for county parks, cultural programs, and libraries;
- held three workforce development summits;
- pushed for reforming industrial development agencies;
- renegotiated Buffalo Bills lease;
- created a Medicaid Waste, Fraud & Abuse Task Force;
- created a Buffalo Niagara Land Bank Corporation;
- and successfully addressed eliminating budget gap and submitted a balanced budget.

In a *Buffalo News* survey of community leaders, Poloncarz was rated on 18 different leadership characteristics and received an overall score of C+. The four categories that Poloncarz scored the lowest were initiating proposals, transparency, temperament, and vision.

After receiving the list of Poloncarz's accomplishments, I sent a follow-up email:

Thank you very much for your response. The list of the County Executive's accomplishments from 2012 is very good. I just don't see much in that list that appears to be very creative or innovative. Accomplishing anything in government is not easy and I applaud the accomplishments you cite.

How would the County Executive answer this question: What is the most innovative or creative idea you tried to achieve or were able to achieve in 2012?

The response I received to the above question was silence.

Erie County Legislature addresses few items of substance

Kevin Hardwick: a highly recognizable elected official.

Every two weeks, legislators have an open floor to propose new ideas by filing resolutions and proposed local laws. The dictionary defines a legislature as a body that passes laws, but very few laws or items of substance are actually passed by the Erie County Legislature. The number of local laws passed by the Erie County Legislature the past three years were:

• in 2010, two laws—reducing the size of the legislature and creating a Silver Alert System to disseminate immediate information to the public regarding a missing senior citizen.

• in 2011, three laws—conservation easements for Orchard Park and West Seneca, elimination of a local law regarding home healthcare providers.

• in 2012, one law—prohibiting cyber-bullying in Erie County.

While very few laws were enacted, the County Legislature did consider 391 resolutions, most of which honored individuals and community organizations. The legislator filing the most resolutions in 2012 that honored individuals and organizations was Kevin Hardwick with 85 items.

A listing of some of the resolutions filed by Hardwick shows you what these items are all about:

• honoring the 85th birthday of John Long.

• honoring the lives of John Paul King Baron, Deborah Cellar, Steven M. Majewicz, Sally Richard, John R. MacNeil, Robert E. Hooper, Jr., Marion D. Armesto, John C. Bihary, Herbert Rowswell, Shannon Peters, Barbara A. Spaulding, Harold R. Mueller, Kenneth Tollner, Marjorie R. Costello, and Bernard Vanderbles.

• honoring Linda Foels on her retirement as Parks & Recreation Director for the City of Tonawanda.

• honoring Jesse Lalka for his accomplishments on the basketball court at Tonawanda High School.

• honoring Magdalyn Chauby on performing at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall.

• congratulating Tim Winder, Boy Scout Troop No. 510, on obtaining the rank of Eagle Scout.

• honoring Mississippi Mudds on their 25th anniversary.

• honoring Francine McMahon for being recognized as the Community Service Person of the Year by the Grand Island Chamber of Commerce.

While such resolutions are nice gestures, is this really what county legislators and their staff should be spending time on? I personally like Hardwick but find it disappointing that he is the king of resolutions without any substance to them. Hardwick is intelligent and articulate, a college professor who teaches government courses at Canisius College. Frankly I expect more substance from him on county government issues.

Researching, drafting, filing, and forwarding each one of these resolutions takes the time of taxpayer-funded employees.

When not honoring people, the Legislature passes resolutions that symbolically call upon the federal or state government to take action, such as these items:

• reforming the Federal Tax Code.

• requesting New York State to revise guidelines referring to the application of sunscreen in schools.

• encouraging passage and implementation of the Federal Egg Products Inspection Act Amendments.

• supporting the work of Amnesty International and the United Nations to oppose human rights abuses in Uganda.

Recognizing nationally designated weeks and months are important to legislators, too, as indicated by the following resolutions that were introduced:

• recognizing National Hispanic Heritage Month.

• recognizing National Police Week.

• celebrating Earth Day.

• recognizing Poison Prevention Week.

I don't think that there is enough county-related work for legislators so they create busy work by introducing resolutions that troll for votes by honoring people and symbolically calling upon other levels of government to do something.

The county budget

In addition to acting on local laws, a big responsibility of the County Legislature is to approve a county budget. While passing a budget is important, the reality is that County officials have very little say over the county budget, as 90 percent of the budget is mandated by the state and federal governments.

The total county budget is about $1.2 billion; county officials have a say over only $120 million. The legislature's amendments to the county executive's proposed budget in 2010 consisted of $8.2 million—.07% of the total budget.

In 2011 the legislature changed $5 million of the county executive's proposed budget. In 2012 the legislature changed $8.5 million.

The Erie County Legislature consists of 11 members paid $42,500 per year for a part-time position. The chair of the legislature is paid $52,500 per year and the majority and minority leaders are paid $47,500. The legislature meets every two weeks. Meeting agendas and minutes can be viewed on-line at www.erie.gov.

At the April 7, 2013 meeting the following items were on the agenda:

- 21 resolutions honoring individuals and community organizations.
- four local laws pending (they are usually tabled meeting after meeting).
- committee reports from six committees.
- six resolutions not honoring individuals/organizations but which are typically symbolic, such as demanding an end to federal sugar subsidies, support for keeping the Bills in Erie County, supporting state investment for the Maid of the Mist to continue.
- 42 letters from elected officials, department heads, and others that usually get received and filed after being sent to a committee.

Where are the new ideas in county government?

We need leaders who are willing to initiate bold new ideas. I have personally contacted all county legislators by e-mail on several occasions providing them with drafted resolutions for the following items:

- creating an independent Citizens Budget Review Commission.
- establishing three high-priority goals for each county department.
- making county government more open and transparent

I could not get a single legislator interested in introducing any of these ideas. Only two legislators even bothered to respond to any of my emails.

While this article focuses on county government, from my review of other local government meeting agendas, there seems to be a lack of new ideas and new approaches being discussed and tried across the Buffalo region. Leadership is about taking initiative. The County of Erie and Western New York need elected leaders who are passionate about initiating new ideas.

Paul Wolf is an attorney and the founder of the Center for Reinventing Government: www.reinventinggov.org.

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