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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

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Political Winds

“If you know what you believe, decisions come pretty easy. If you’re one of those types of people that are always trying to figure out which way the wind is blowing, decision-making can be difficult. But I find that I know who I am. I know what I believe in, and I know where I want to lead the country.”

George W. Bush, August 23rd, 2001

In the summer of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln was out for one of his rides around town when he came across a hospital train of wounded soldiers arriving back from the failed Peninsula Campaign in Virginia. Wanting to gain more factual information about the conditions of the army, and more important wanting to meet and let the soldiers know he cared for them, Lincoln starts to ride over to them. His companions try to talk him out of it. The hospital train is surrounded by widows and family members of the wounded and the dead and his companions tell him they are not going to be happy with you and will speak badly of you. Lincoln ignores them and rides over and visits with them, accepting the bad words and hurtful feelings of the crowd. True leaders are willing to look for the truth and facts, even if they are sometimes disturbing and hard to take.

Throughout my time as an elected official, I have all too often had to run against the “political winds”; that is supporting what is best for those that have elected me rather than what is considered by some to be the politically right decision. It has been “recommended” to me all too often that I back off of an issue or not ask a question that may not be popular to some. In each of these situations, I have rejected these recommendations and instead trusted my instincts of what is best for those that have elected me rather than what could be best for a political career. Gladly each and every time I have faced this decision I have been pleased to see the positive effects of making the correct decision rather than the easy one.

Shortly after being elected to my first political position on the Washington City Council in 1999, a friend and local businessman, Mahlon Blumenshine, asked me to look at a local road project he had envisioned. In 1978, the same year I was born, he was a City Council Member for the City of Washington. Smashed between the City of Washington and its neighboring community, the City of East Peoria, is a collection of subdivisions that are divided between both cities and a large portion remaining in the County.

It was in the middle of this political jurisdiction confusion that his road project was proposed to bring a north-south corridor for the safer travel of the residents and easier access for business. The problem with his idea was that no-one wanted to claim the project. Both communities had other projects and besides the area was located at the edge of their communities. The county was not in a position or interested either. After looking into it, the answer from all of my colleagues was, ‘don’t waste your time; the subject was dead’.

Seeing the need and the benefits, I continued to push and pursue this much needed road project. After three and half years on the City Council, I was elected to the County Board. Now I was in a better position to support this project as I now represented not only the residents of the City of Washington, but also the residents of the City of East Peoria and the county. Once again, I found very little support and again I received the recommendation to drop this issue. It was now projected to be a million dollar road.

Looking around, I found interest for the project in the Tazewell County Highway Engineer, Norman Johanson. We worked together to successfully cause a meeting of representatives of all of the governing bodies involved; the Cities of Washington and East Peoria, the Tazewell County Board and Washington Township. Each of them had a portion in this and each of them had benefits for the individuals they represented. At the end of the meeting, the plan was finalized. It would take another eight years to break ground, but this coming year work will finish on the now multi-million dollar Summit Road Extension.

Now recognized widely as huge opportunity to revitalize the local business economy including the failing Sunnyland Plaza, and as a much safer traffic route to other areas, all of the governing bodies gathered once more to mark the ground breaking last year. Proudly, Mahlon Blumenshine was able to be present at the event.

In the fall of 2009, fellow County Board Member and friend Melvin Stanford and I were enjoying a meal and discussing the issues facing the Tazewell County Board. One that he brought to my attention was his efforts to bring forward a Vehicle Policy. Surprisingly, the county board did not have a policy concerning the usage of the County Vehicles. After our meeting I looked into it. Mel had already had a policy ready, but had encountered resistance. Seeing the need, I told him I would join him in working to see this policy come up for a vote.

Once more, I was advised by many within my political party to drop this issue. Some saw it as potentially embarrassing that questions would be raised of some of the usages they had allowed of the county vehicles. The main individual was up for re-election and rather than work towards finding a mutual common ground on this issue, he let it be known he did not want to hear anything else about it. He also let it be known along with several other objectors that in his opinion I did not have the “political clout” to push this issue.

Now many elected officials concern themselves with this “political clout”. I on the other hand concern myself more with the thought of, ‘is *the issue right?*’ If so, then the will of the public can overcome any “political clout” standing in the way. All that is needed is the right leader to step forward and properly address the issue.

In February of last year I brought the vehicle use policy issue up to the Human Resources Committee, the first step towards getting it up for a vote before the County Board. As many of you will recall, road block after road block was thrown up to stop the progress. At each road block came the familiar phone calls pressing me to back off or face political suicide. At each road block, I stepped forward to continue discussing this issue with the public. Each time I gained more and more support from the general public. It took till December and more work is needed, but it passed.

These are only two examples. I could have addressed the pressure I received from supporting Dan Rutherford in his first run for the State Senate in 2000 over a local candidate for the post, or the pressure I received for supporting now Judges Michael Risinger and John Vespa in 2010 for once again not supporting a local candidate for the post, or the many other times over the past decade I have faced down this type of decision. For each situation in which I chose to follow the best interest of the public rather than the “political winds” of the moment I have come to appreciate the benefits of doing what is right rather than what is easy.

Unlike too many of my colleagues in politics today, I research the issues and individuals I support and make myself so readily available and open to my constituents that I feel confident in what I believe in is what is best for them and as such have little regard for the “political winds”.

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