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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

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January ASO Magazine Column **Legislative Bodies**

“Halleck originates nothing; anticipates nothing; takes no responsibility; suggests nothing; is good for nothing.” Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells writing about Union General Henry W. Halleck

As many of you have come to find by reading my columns, I love Civil War history. While I believe that General Halleck may be inappropriately bashed in the above quote, as he performed quite well towards the end of the war in the supporting role he ended up in, it works for the point I want to make with this column. Today, many legislative bodies are filled with individuals that do exactly what is mentioned in this quote and results are the same. Too many people are elected for the “prestige” and not enough are elected that understand the role and/or choose not to work the position.

Legislative bodies by design of the founding fathers were the instruments of origin of the laws that we live by. Long ago, with some exceptions, the U.S. Congress gave this responsibility to the Executive Branch to bring forth new ideas and allowed it to drive the agenda. In local government, the same reversal of roles has occurred.

Many elected legislative officials are very good at going to meetings, listening to the conversation, and voting. And to them, this is the end of the responsibility of the position that they have been elected to. They allow the administration to set the agenda, do the research and gather the facts, guide the conversation, and in the end, they really allow the administration to hijack the responsibilities of the legislative position they have been elected to perform. If this administrative position is an elected official, say a full time mayor or other full time presiding officer, then at least the public still has control, but too many times today these individuals are appointed or hired staff, leaving the public with very little direct control.

The problem with this lack of understanding of the real purpose of the position they have been elected to perform is that they are the body that should be guiding the process. The legislative body, be it a City Council, County Board, State or National Representatives, are elected to be the voice of the citizens. As such, the role they are elected to was designed to act on the public’s behalf and understand the public’s issues and concerns. With the process being reversed as it is today, we have appointed officials that are recommending the laws and guiding the process rather than the voice of the people.

We need to get back into the habit of electing individuals that are interested in doing the hard work the job requires and was designed by the founding fathers to do. This means we need individuals that actively engage the constituents that have elected them to get not only a better understanding of the issue and problems, but also to explain to the constituents why they are taking the action they have when they vote. We need public officials that look long term as to what needs to be done to improve the processes rather than ones that sit back and handle issue after issue only after they have become problems. We need elected officials that go out and work the job rather than attend one meeting after another and only look at what is being presented to them rather than doing the research themselves.

In the business environment, you will not stay in business long if you only resolve issues as they arise and don't have any short and long term goals to accomplish. Yet this is what has become of the legislative process. Too many are just attending meetings, placing votes, and going home. To this end, we have ended up accepting too many elected officials that originate nothing, anticipate nothing, take no responsibility, and suggest nothing. And in the end the result is the same today as it was back during the Civil War.

How do we change this? As the voting public, it is our responsibility to hold these officials responsible. We need to seek out individuals that have the drive to work the position properly. For those that are already elected, we need to review what they have accomplished. Just showing up to meetings and voting can no longer be the basis for approval. We must ask the question what have you done to improve the process? What are you bringing to the table? Just like a job interview, we need to look over not only their education and previous experience, but also what they have accomplished while in those other roles. This is the only way we will be able to change the mindset of what the role of the legislative body is and is the only hope we have to get back to what the founding fathers envisioned as the role of the Legislative Body.

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