

Appreciating Florida Local Governments

By Dr. Bob Lee

When one thinks of September 11, 2001, all kinds of emotions and perceptions surface. America, indeed, forever changed...

When I think of the aftermath of that that day, I'm drawn to the roles of public servants, not at the federal or state level, but at the level where citizens receive most of their services; the level where first responders are employed and where disaster planning and preparation and "daily emergency response" is part of their routine. I'm drawn to the level of government where people can "pick up the phone" and actually reach their elected and appointed officials, where budgets, by law, must be balanced and there's no printing press that creates money to make up the difference. I am drawn to the level of government where constituents stand 15 feet away from their elected and appointed officials every meeting and are given an opportunity to speak on the items being considered and where elected officials actually read their bills/legislation before they are passed. I'm drawn to local government - the most responsive, responsible, and most prevalent government in America; yet, the level of government one seldom hears about on the major news channels or other major media outlets.

There is no place in the world where government is more open for public participation and public inspection than Florida local government. An employee's personnel records, emails, telephone logs, and other correspondence are all open for public review simply by asking. Unlike elected officials at the federal and state level, as well as most local government bodies in other states, elected officials in Florida, are prohibited, by state law, from discussing among themselves, any item that could be considered at a future meeting except during a publicly noticed meeting. Ironically, the same state legislators that proudly point to this legal constraint as a victory for the citizens, have exempted themselves from complying with this very provision. The "closed door deals" that state and federal officials routinely participate in is a major contributor to the contention we've been witnessing between the major political parties at both the state and federal level.

It's disheartening when public employees (particularly at the local level in Florida) are somehow lumped into the "reality TV" show we call FOX, MSNBC, and CNN in terms of the negative perceptions being created from these networks about government generally. As citizens, we need to channel that negativity to where it is deserved and consciously not lump in all public servants, particularly at the local level, who are your neighbors: those fellow human beings that you share a pew in church, or meet in the grocery store or at a parents gathering to organize a local soccer team, or simply share a wave or hello on your ways to work each day. Like you, these people know your neighborhood and are friends with people that you know. And like you, they take pride in their work and desire, and deserve, recognition for a job well done. Those who made the ultimate sacrifice on that September day deserve our highest admiration and will reside forever in our hearts. Those local public servants (i.e. police, firefighters, building and code inspectors, paramedics, sanitation workers, utility workers, parks and street maintenance workers, and all those people behind the scenes) that enable us to receive

local government services everyday in Florida deserve not to be “lumped into” the negative, ineluctable perceptions of government created by certain federal officials and the national news media. Instead, they deserve, like you, appreciation for just doing their job and doing their best to provide for their loved ones during these uncertain times.

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