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Some New Year's resolutions for public officials

By S.C. Comptroller Richard Eckstrom

For many of us, the arrival of January 1 means more than a new calendar year. It's an opportunity for a new chapter… a chance to get things right, to commit to bettering ourselves in some way. We resolve to eat healthier and exercise, save more, spend more time with loved ones, learn new skills or achieve a personal goal.

For those of us in public office, the New Year is an opportunity to take stock of how we serve and commit to ways we can improve. To that end, I offer some suggested resolutions for everyone in a position of public trust – from elected officials to agency administrators and members of government boards and commissions.

1. Remember whose money we're spending. Too many public officials view increased spending as the answer to every problem, without much regard for the ever-growing burden being placed on taxpayers. Such decisions shouldn't be taken lightly. Every dollar spent is a dollar taken from someone's pocket, which means there's one less dollar available for bills, groceries, college tuition, or retirement savings.

We should always weigh the constant pressure for higher spending against the drawbacks. After all, there's probably no better way for government to bolster peoples' finances than to allow them to retain their own, hard-earned money. Higher spending and taxing does just the opposite.

2. Commit to transparency. In my experience, the policy-makers who best serve the public interest are those who operate in full public view. They're more sensitive to their constituents' needs when they know those constituents are watching. Thus, one of the most important things any governmental body can do is to let citizens see how it makes decisions and spends funds. (Above all, in my opinion, financial records should be conveniently accessible on the web.)

Transparency creates government which answers to the people and connects with them.

3. Focus on issues that matter. The hot-button issues aren't always the most important issues. Especially at the state level, there's a tendency among some to spend much time and energy on items that are likely to generate headlines or score political points – often at the expense of matters which are less exciting but of greater relevance to the lives of average South Carolinians.

Not long ago the political debate seemed dominated by a series of hot-button issues including flags, statues, and names on school buildings and city streets. Meanwhile, far more consequential problems – for example, the crisis facing our state's vastly underfunded and deteriorating pension system – have been left unsolved.

It'd be worthwhile to revisit our priorities and perhaps devote less effort to things that have little direct impact on citizens' lives and place a greater emphasis on the more important—even if less politically rewarding— nuts and bolts of government.

4. Elevate the debate. For those seeking an elected position or otherwise engaging in political debate, the temptation to play hardball against an opponent can be strong. But so-called "mudslinging" only distracts us from the serious discussions needed to help voters size up candidates and make informed decisions. And it can have a disillusioning effect, discouraging people from becoming involved in the process. Candidates who genuinely want the best for the community they hope to serve can help keep the debate on a higher plane by refusing to engage in personal attacks.

Public service is a noble pursuit. Sadly, trust in our leadership is an ever-dwindling commodity… further eroding with each new case of a government official gaming the system or mishandling resources. That means those who conscientiously serve must aim a little higher to salvage whatever public trust remains. As we leave 2017 behind, let's make a commitment to doing so.

Finally, I wish you a joyous, healthy, and prosperous 2018. Happy New Year!

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