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My View

South Carolina's leadership should set goals for the new year

By Richard Eckstrom

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With a new year comes an opportunity for a new beginning. For many people, it's a time to reflect on ways we can better ourselves. We make resolutions to get in shape, take up a new hobby, break a bad habit or accomplish some other goal.

For those in positions of elected leadership, the new year offers an opportunity to reflect on how we can better serve the public.

Here are four good resolutions for those in public office – from our local town, county and school board representatives, to our state and federal officials.

1. Remember the taxpayers. Too many politicians view public spending as the main measure of their service. They see costly new services, programs or buildings as the answer to every problem. Unfortunately, they often turn a blind eye to the burden their spending puts on the taxpayers.

Some government spending is necessary, of course. But our elected officials should be mindful of the pinch that their spending can put on people's wallets... and reject spending which is unnecessary. After all, one sure way to improve residents' quality of life is to let them keep more of their own, hard-earned money.

2. Pull back the curtains of government. When spending is done in full public view and decisions are made in the open, government is simply more accountable.

Hold important discussions in public meetings, rather than in closed-door executive sessions. And give people easy access to those meetings. Make records available to residents upon request – and free of charge.

And post spending details on the Web.

Several years ago, I took the initiative to create the state's Transparency website, which shows individual expenditures made by state government. South Carolina was one of the first few states to have such a site, although other states followed our lead. While nearly every other state budgeted additional money for their sites, my office did so without requesting a single extra penny – showing it could be done easily and inexpensively.

Later, I began a campaign to persuade counties, cities and school districts to post their spending details on the Web. It was a success. And while these local governments initially expressed concern about providing this level of disclosure, many ultimately found that it resulted in greater efficiency. For example, residents file fewer requests for information when that information is available at the click of a mouse. And it makes abuse easier to catch as well.

Openness improves the quality of government. And that's a win for everyone.

3. Show respect toward those with opposing views. Unfortunately, debate on important issues often descends into finger-pointing and name-calling, which distracts us from finding solutions to problems. We'd all do well to lay down our arms and commit to the kind of civil debate necessary to solve our most pressing challenges.

Of course, it's important to stand up for tightly held principles. But we can do so while also respecting the views of those who think differently.

4. Show leadership outside of your official duties. True leadership means being involved in more than just politics. Elected officials can set a great example by volunteering in their home communities. When ordinary people see their leaders involved in non-political causes – such as volunteering in the schools or supporting charities – it inspires them to do the same.

These aren't Republican or Democratic ideas. They're simply my thoughts on how office holders of all affiliations can improve our own public service, and in a very real way better the lives of those we serve.

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