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## ECKSTROM: New Year an opportunity to rededicate ourselves good government

By Richard Eckstrom Jan 9, 2019



**Richard Eckstrom**

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We can all afford to better ourselves in some way, and this time each year many of us resolve to do so – whether it’s adopting a healthier lifestyle, working a little harder toward a goal, or learning a new skill.

And for those of us in public office, this season of resolutions is an opportunity to reflect on our own service and consider ways we can do better. So as I do each New Year, I’ve taken it upon myself to offer a few goals I believe everyone in public leadership – elected officials, agency heads, bureaucrats, and members of various public boards and commissions – would do well to commit:

**1. Take it easy on the taxpayers.** Politicians spend the fruits of their constituents’ labor ostensibly to provide services that improve those constituents’ lives. But we know that a lot of politicians have a wildly differing view than Joe Taxpayer does about what constitutes prudent use of public dollars. Consequently, the cost of local, state and federal government has become unduly burdensome for far too many.

Conscientious public officials will remain mindful of the pinch that their decisions put on people’s wallets, and will remember that one sure way to improve people’s quality of life is to let them keep more of their own money.

**2. Commit to transparency.** Government best serves the people when the sun is permitted to shine in, so we ought to make it a priority to show citizens how decisions are made and how tax dollars are spent. Make sure public records are readily available to citizens. Publish as much information as possible – including all

itemized expenditures – on the web. Ensure meetings are streamed on the web if possible, and held with plenty of advance notice to maximize citizen-participation.

Transparency holds public officials accountable, makes problems easier to catch, and fosters trust between government and the governed.

☐ Respect those who ask the tough questions. Just about every public body has one: the citizen watchdog who attends every meeting, often sitting in the front row. They often pose uncomfortable questions, write letters to the editor, and sometimes use open-records laws to request information. Though they may be annoying to the politicians, their role is a vital one.

In holding their leaders' feet to the fire, these good government warriors are laboring to improve their government. They're uncovering waste, rooting out abuse, and generally putting public officials on notice that someone's watching. Besides, in a time when most folks go to work, come home, and learn about the day's events on the evening news, citizens who care enough to become involved in the process deserve our respect – yes, even those who ask the tough questions.

☐ Evaluate priorities. The current \$24 billion deficit in the state pension system for teachers and public employees is perhaps our state's most critical issue – with far-reaching ramifications – yet it doesn't receive nearly the focus it deserves. And therein lies one of the fundamental challenges to quality government: Elected officials frequently devote their attention to issues they view as having political benefits – such as those designed to generate headlines, appeal to a favored constituency, or gain advantage over political adversaries – while leaving unaddressed the more mundane, but often more substantial, matters.

The wise will remember that the glitzy issues aren't always the most important, and it's often those with less headline-grabbing appeal – particularly those related to finance – that are of greater

consequence.

**E**levate the debate. One of the hallmarks of a healthy political system is the ability to disagree amicably. Unfortunately, with each passing year we seem to drift further and further from that ideal. Public debate has descended into rancor and demonization. And if this current climate discourages good people from entering public life, the cost is indeed high.

Public officials at all levels can – and must – take the lead in restoring civility. We should strive to set the right example... to demonstrate that it's possible to advocate our views – even to fight for closely-held convictions – without descending into the gutter. Those who have confidence in the strength of their positions should never hesitate to take the high road.

Our election campaigns are a good place to start. Positive, issue-oriented campaigns help establish a standard for others, and help voters make informed decisions.

There's not a person in government who doesn't have at least some room to improve how they serve the public. Let's dedicate ourselves to doing so in 2019.

Richard Eckstrom is a CPA and the state Comptroller.

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