

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Remarks as Made

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SHAPE event: "The Importance of Local Government"

January 24, 2019

Thank you for inviting me to be part of a conversation about the importance of local government. And thank you for your interest in local government. I am happy to be here and make a few remarks and then get the panel discussion going.

Local government is ubiquitous, touching every part of our lives. And as such it is, by its very nature, important. Let's unpack that a bit.

To start with the big picture, America is a vast and diverse place and local government reflects that diversity. In Pennsylvania that is expressed as 12.8 million residents are organized into 67 Counties, 2560 Municipalities, 500 school districts and various other special purpose governments.

Of the municipal governments, only 15 have populations above 50,000 and 1,986 have populations of fewer than 5,000 residents – 78%. People often ask me why we have so many local governments. My reply is that incorporating municipalities throughout Pennsylvania solved a problem at the time. Here in Allegheny County, it is well known that our patterns of municipal development directly reflect our economic history as the world's leading industrial powerhouse.

From a civics viewpoint, the most important thing about local government is that it is an expression in federalism. Federalism, as in a system, not a political position in favor of a strong central government such as depicted in the current run of Hamilton.

As an expression of federalism, local government is essentially part of a power sharing system which was born out of the compromise of the Founding. I think its best part, even recognizing its deep flaws. The 10th amendment recognized the power of the states and the 14th constrained it. State power and local power expands and contracts throughout history.

The importance of this power sharing arrangement shouldn't be taken for granted. It alleviates a lot of pressure in politics. When I was at the Local Government Academy, I frequently meet with international

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

leaders to talk about how local government assists in peace-making. Local government is crucial to functioning society.

Here in southwestern PA, we have a strong tradition of local government, which when well-deployed results in expanded local power for average citizens. Our local government traditions run deep. We are, after all, the home of Albert Gallatin, who was no friend of Alexander Hamilton. If you haven't been to Friendship Hill, his home in Point Marion, PA, go to gain a better understanding of the man and our region. Afterwards maybe you will get working on your musical. Note that Gal-a-tin has just as many syllables as Ham-il-ton!

Local government as a system of government is the largest government in America. More services are deployed on a per capita basis by local government, more taxes collected, more individuals are employed by local governments than the federal or state governments. This is remarkable because there is no one administrative or political ecosystem of local government in the US.

So overall, when we consider the importance of local government, we are considering a system that is large and impactful. Important by its very nature. And it is truly on us to make the most of it.

After we recognize that local government is inherently important, the question then becomes, what is important is in *local governance*. What are the systems we use, the commitments we make, and the courses of actions we choose in order to have an impact? Let's consider this in terms of individual skills that can be deployed in local government.

I'd like to present a list of the top ten impactful skills you can deploy in local government. This is only a list according to me, but I am delighted to share it with you, as it is forever a work in progress.

So, top 10 skills you can deploy in local government.

1. Civic duty. Number 1 is an opportunity for us to fulfill our sense of civic duty. We always remember that local government developed as a uniquely American experiment in local association. It is this capacity for local association that Alexis De Touqville wrote about when chronicling his trip in America in 1831. Local government is vital to the health of the republic, it is not just community service, which is important but not the same. Local government "levels up" your service.
2. Your smarts. Developing a working knowledge of the powers and duties of local governments, our abilities as citizens to influence it, and the purposes and accomplishments of non-profit

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

organizations who share the civic space feeds intellectual curiosity and our curiosity in turn can make government better. If you run for office, you will spend the time getting to know your potential constituents and if you win you will spend time learning something totally different than you learned while campaigning.

3. **Flexibility.** Local government's greatest strength is its responsiveness. And because it is close to the people it is generally characterized by higher instances of compromise and higher rates of citizens satisfaction than other levels of government. What services do we want? What is the best way to deliver them? Do we get value for our tax dollars? These are practical questions local officials face. Local government leaders can field test beliefs and really come to know their community.
4. **Health and Wellness.** Upstream issues like local permitting and zoning contribute to downstream issues like clean air and clean water. Upstream developments like sidewalks and parks contribute to downstream benefits like fitness and well-being. Remembering everything is essentially public health is critical to overcoming compartmentalized thinking that has historically lead to some undesirable outcomes.
5. **Thinking globally, acting locally¹** That is how the saying goes. I would tweak that to say "thinking globally and acting regionally". Because the scale of your actions matters, especially given the mismatch between the structure of local government and the nature of many of the challenges we face. Those challenges don't respect municipal boundaries and we all move back and forth between many municipalities every day. Without a concerted regional effort, we experience two major effects. First, when others fail around us we feel it. And secondly, our local power is diffused and our impact lessens in Harrisburg and Washington. Regions are not an ideology, they are just facts. In local government we get to keep that in mind when making public choices.
6. **Thoughtful consideration local government structure.** Small programs without economies of scale are wasteful. Large programs without accountability are wasteful. So both too small and too big can be wasteful. The question isn't whether or not local government structure matters but how much it matters to us at this time. There is no one-size fits all. Constantly considering

¹ regionally

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

the cost and benefits of our public service delivery options is the job.

7. **Fairness.** What ever you do as an elected official, you will be called on to think about fairness because your actions have consequences and there are people impacted by changes to institutions. Situations that ask individuals to bear the effects for collective responsibilities will result in resistance to change at best, and all out failure of efforts to have an impact at worst. Consider and deploy your best understandings of fairness when serving in local government.
8. **Constructive conflict.** Local government provides one of the best environments for us to model constructive conflict resolution. This is important today more than ever. Reinhold Neibuhr known most widely for authoring the Serenity Prayer, said, “politics will to the end of history, an area where conscience and power meet; where the ethical and coercive factors of human life work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.” Local government is conflictual in nature. It exists to solve problems. You can bring an ability for navigating competing values with civility to local government. That is not to say there is no conflict, but you can help to make sure it is handled constructively. Further, this critical skill helps boards gain momentum and get out of first gear. It is more than just being polite or formal.
9. **Networking.** *“Never underestimate the power of a small committed group to change the world. Indeed, it is all that ever has.”* This popular quote is important and relevant to local government because it is truly the way impact is achieved. I wish Brian could have made our panel and I admire what he and leaders in Millvale, Etna and Sharspburg are doing in the EcoDistrict. I am inspired for the QVCOG to grow in that direction. But what is most gratifying for me is to recall Brian at the Local Government Academy when he and his band of Millvalians were just getting started. They were, indeed, that “small committed group.”
10. **Build the Farm Team.** Local government can be a proving ground if you are thinking of higher office and that “farm team” system benefits local communities. Since local government isn’t just about the self-expression, the local leader learns to balance their beliefs with their knowledge of the community and what can be learned from others like other local governments or career professionals. We need good politicians and if you are honing your skills for an

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

eventual run for future office, you will earn your governing chops in local government.

So we met here tonight to contemplate the importance of local government and how to make an impact in our community. I am excited to get started with the panel. As you consider the importance of local government, I offer my help and assistance. Thanks for the opportunity to share some thoughts tonight!

Questions for Panel to consider

What was a compelling reason for running for office?

What are you hoping to achieve in your time in office?

What gives your public service the most meaning to you?

How will you measure your success as a public official?

What is something you know now that you wish you knew back before you ran?

What is your most important action item?

What advice or encouragement would you provide to someone contemplating a run for office?