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Politicians are People First and Elected Officials Second

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Dustin Fife

The most supportive politician I have ever worked with is going to jail. He is currently a county commissioner for San Juan County, Utah. I met him six years ago when I was the director of San Juan County Libraries. He was elected by a population that was frustrated with federal and state government, and he promised to fight for local control of land and resources. He was arrested for planning and executing an illegal public protest over the closure of disputed county roads on federally protected lands. He was tried and convicted by a jury of his peers and he will have to pay a hefty fine and legal fees for his actions, along with a ten-day stay in jail (Romboy, 2015).

I am not writing about this commissioner in order to argue the merits of his case. He made his decisions, some that I agree with and some that I do not, and it has impacted his life immensely. I am writing about him because he was an enthusiastic library supporter. Most people might assume that this particular region and commissioner would not be strong supporters of libraries. They would look at local voting history and demographic information and assume the worst. However, both San Juan County and this commissioner consistently supported libraries during my time in southern Utah.

What is the point of this story? First, be incredibly careful about your political assumptions. People and communities will surprise you and they deserve the benefit of the doubt. Second, during this current season of political discontent, we all need to remind ourselves that politicians are complex human beings. While reflecting on the resignation of Sarah Palin as the governor of Alaska for NPR, Scott Simon wrote, “Politicians are human. If you prick them, they will bleed. If you pet them, they’ll lick your hand. They’re filled with anxieties, contradictions and duplicities, but I wonder what groups, including journalists, salespeople, hammer dulcimer makers or Franciscan priests, are not” (Simon, 2009).

Things You Can Do

Elected officials are people first and politicians second. With that in mind, take an interest in your politicians as people, and hopefully they will take an interest in your libraries as politicians. You do not have to agree on

everything, indeed you do not have to agree on anything, to be civil and engaged. Some politicians are more accessible than others, but almost all funding for libraries is decided at the local level. It is decided in cities, counties, and districts and those politicians are often the most approachable. I worked with elected officials in a small county, but learned many lessons from those interactions. I have turned them into seven suggestions that can easily be incorporated into any library’s political plan. Some of these suggestions are most appropriate for directors and managers, but local officials are often eager to meet with any constituent.

1. When new officials are elected or you move to a new job, make appointments and meet your elected leaders individually as appropriate.
2. Take interest in their initiatives. Do not only talk about your vision for the library. To them the library is only one part of a community that they have been elected to serve. Ask them about initiatives that are important to them. Ask them how the library can help. When possible, openly align library goals with broader community goals.
3. Create services that serve their needs. Ask them if the library can do any research for the council or commission. Ask them what information resources the governing body needs. Break down the walls of the library by being visible in the community.
4. Take their votes and decisions at face value and give them the benefit of the doubt. If you want to know more, respectfully ask them why they have chosen to make certain decisions that impact the library. Always be respectful and use proper channels of communication.
5. Don’t allow yourself to casually slip into disrespectful conversations about decision makers with library staff or community members.
6. Take responsibility for creating an ongoing relationship and never assume you do or do not have their support.
7. Always see them as people first. Just like anyone else, they have good and bad days.

These practices allowed me to create strong relationships with politicians and helped me to better understand how difficult it is to be an elected official.

Conclusion

I have enjoyed each of the county commissioners with which I have worked, but I started this article by talking about one in particular. I had an especially strong connection with him. When I first got to know him, I asked him to help me better understand my service area. I was new to the area, and he was a lifelong resident. We began to have occasional breakfasts together, and he took an interest in my personal and professional life. I learned about his family and he learned about mine. I watched as he struggled through an incredibly difficult situation. His struggle emphasized his humanity for me. So often politicians are seen as an unsavory other, but they are people that are worthy of our kindness and empathy. Individuals run for public office for a multitude of reasons and they do not stop being humans on Election Day.

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About the Author

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