

Time For a Shake-Up at City Hall

When I moved here in 1977 after getting a state government job, I expected Salem would be a great place to live; to raise a child; to be part of a large community with small town values.

I was right. Even though over the years I've done a lot of griping about Salem, my wife and I have never seriously thought about leaving the area.

One of the things I've liked is how City Hall rarely seemed to be infected with the divisive political disease that afflicts the nation as a whole. Symptoms of this malady are extremism, refusal to compromise, a focus on ideology rather than the public good, dismissal of facts.

Disturbingly, these days elected officials and top management at the City of Salem behave uncomfortably akin to politicians at the national level. "Our way or the highway" is an unspoken yet obvious mantra that guides their actions.

Until recently my citizen activism mainly involved land use issues outside the city limits. I got to know the Marion County Board of Commissioners well. Along with many of my neighbors, we spent countless hours at lengthy hearings.

All too often we felt that our testimony was listened to, but not really heard.

Now that I've become involved with City issues like the unjustified removal of the US Bank trees; building an unneeded, unwanted, and unpaid for \$600 million Third Bridge; attempted imposition of parking meters against the wishes of downtown businesses; and secretive planning for an expensive City Hall renovation that would do away with the Peace Plaza, I realize that the City has the same problem as the County:

Viewing citizen involvement as a problem to be brushed aside, rather than as an opportunity to make better decisions.

Over and over, City officials pretend they have all the answers. Yet, they don't. If they sincerely paid attention to what critics, gadflies, questioners, opponents, and others Who Dare to Point Out the Emperor's Lack of Clothes are saying, much improved policies would result.

Well-run businesses continually ask their customers, "How are we doing? What could we do better? Are you having problems with what we offer?"

I'm not aware that Salem's Mayor, City Manager, City Councillors, and top management are asking these questions. Based on my experience and that of others with whom I've spoken, the City looks upon public input as an irritant to be brushed away. When people point out problems with how the City is going about things, this is viewed as an attack to be deflected instead of an invitation to collaborate on improvements.

For example, recently Geoffrey James, a local architect, met with City Manager Linda Norris and three of her top staff to discuss ways to improve urban design planning for Salem's downtown riverfront area.

James has some great ideas. But he got a brush-off. Not interested in public input, said these public servants. This is no way to run a city. Time for a shake-up at City Hall.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com