

It's your money, so hold public officials accountable

"Ethics in politics." Many people see this term as an oxymoron, like "soft rock," or "child proof." For most people in politics, though, ethical behavior is the norm rather than the exception.

On the local level, most politicians are no more, nor less, ethical than your neighbor. You may trust one neighbor with your house keys to check in on things while you're away, and think twice about another. All in all, though, they're pretty good folks.

The private sector has the same spectrum of people who adhere closely to what is ethical and those who cross the line. In business, professional relationships that are nurtured or damaged relate to a bottom line and the long-term health of the enterprise. The CEO or president of a corporation answers to its shareholders and its customers, and the market reacts to their behavior.

The public sector is different. The shareholders and customers are all of us. The tax dollars they spend are ours. For example, in the City of Santa Clara, during one four-year term, a councilmember will vote on almost \$2 billion in public funds. Politicians are, and should be, under even greater scrutiny because the license by which they operate is public trust.

It is important to carefully consider the performance of our elected leaders. Not from the vacuum of talk-show blathering or bumper-ticker politics, but from a thoughtful, educated point of view. To that end, let me offer three vital elements that provide the basis for ethical government: the elected official, the sunshine laws, and the public.

First, candidates for public office should be very carefully vetted during the election cycle and held accountable as they serve.

Ask the tough questions of them, and of yourself. What issues are most important to you? No, really ... what are the issues that, long- and short-term, affect your quality of

life. What do the politicians feel about these issues? What skills, experiences and points of view do they bring as a context to the job?

As important as what they say, do they have a track-record that you can research? Have they demonstrated the character and morality to follow through with what they say?

Take the time to meet the candidates when running for office. Read their literature and look at Web sites like the League of Women Voters' www.smartvoter.org or community groups like the NAACP that post their questionnaires online. After the election, go to their meetings and read the newspaper. Send an e-mail, or a letter, or make a telephone call to let them know what you think.

Second, the business of the public must be done in an open, honest forum. In California, smoke filled back room deals are rare and illegal these days, thanks to the Brown Act, the law that ensures public meetings. In America, the public does have a right to communicate directly with their representatives. But, both should be mindful that the conversations are meant to build knowledge to make informed decisions, and not to form a consensus until all sides have been heard, with an open mind, in a public forum.

The public should consider the Brown Act as the floor, not the ceiling. The City of Santa Clara's Campaign Finance Reform Act mandates a series of additional contribution and voluntary expenditure limits, as well as a fundraising window and additional reporting requirements. The public has access to all campaign contributions prior to election day and they are posted online for easy access at santaclaracampaigndollars.org.

Let's be clear, fundraising is not necessarily a bad thing. Freedom of speech found in the printing, postage, and direct mail necessary to share information is an important element of the American political process. At the same time, sunshine laws allow voters to consider politicians in the context of how their campaigns are funded. Do they show bias in their consideration of issues or are they deliberate and fair? Is the money spent as it should be, to express their point of view, or instead on self-enrichment?

The third and most personal part of govern-

ment is your involvement. It's impossible for anyone to tell you what fits your own individual set of morals. Sure, there are societal norms ... murder is bad, chocolate chip cookies are good. But, in politics, there are so many shades of gray (and blue and red) that your political morality is yours, and yours only.

Many people mistakenly approach an election like choosing a homecoming king or queen, voting on personality or popularity. It is not. An election is a job interview and you're the person doing the hiring, so be very careful with your vote.

As busy as we are today, with dual income families to make the grade, or single parents trying to keep their heads above water, it is hard to find the bandwidth. But, consider how much you pay in taxes each year. Would you hire an employee to manage this money without reading their resume and checking their references? No. So, take the time during the election to become educated about the people deciding how to spend your money.

On an ongoing basis, if you invested your annual tax bill in a company every year, would you monitor its performance? I know I would. The benefit of government is that it functions in public, so the information to protect your investment is easier to find.

To help in your research, the City of Santa Clara launched the Vote Ethics program (voteethics.org). The program offers voters the tools to reflect on best practices, incorporate their own ideology, and judge politicians more effectively for themselves. It is a huge step to help Santa Clarans hold public officials accountable to be at their best.

After all of this, if you find yourself frustrated with what you see, you have one more option. Like they saying goes, "If you want something done right, do it yourself." If you are so inclined, you can always contact your local City Clerk and learn more about the process of running for office. And, if you're one of those folks who your neighbors would trust with their house keys, ethics and politics will go together like bread and butter.

ROD DIRIDON JR. is the former global community relations manager for 3Com Corp. and two-term Santa Clara City Councilmember. He is currently the city clerk and auditor for the City of Santa Clara.



Guest
comment

Rod
Diridon Jr.