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Headlines in the Midlands

OP-ED: Watchdog citizens deserve public officials' respect



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It happens in every county, every small town, and every school district. It happens at the state level and at the federal level.

“Watchdogs” monitor the actions of government. They attend meetings. They write letters. They ask the tough questions. They request public records under the Freedom of Information Act. Sometimes, they sound the alarm when they believe tax dollars have been wasted or politicians have misused their power.

To a lot of public officials they’re a pain in the neck, and life would be a lot easier if they’d just go away. But watchdog citizens serve an important purpose. They provide needed oversight for government, whether it’s a local town council, a school board, or a county government. They hold politicians accountable.

Several instances come to my mind in which citizen-watchdogs questioned their local government and made a difference in their community:

- A few years back, a Midlands woman was criticized for taking her school district to court over what she saw as her district's violation of the state's Freedom of Information Act. She was ultimately successful in her attempt to require the school district to hold its meetings in the open.
- In one Lowcountry county, vigilant citizens sounded an alarm when they began to believe their school district was unlawfully using taxpayer money in a campaign to sway the result of a public referendum on a massive school construction plan. As frequently happens, some within the school system worked to paint an unflattering portrayal of these concerned citizens. But in February, a top school district official was indicted on a charge of misusing public funds for campaign purposes.

Of course, guilt or innocence has yet to be proven. But the indictment certainly gives credence to the watchdogs' actions.

And if it turns out the school district was, in fact, using taxpayer dollars to help pass their ballot measure, these citizens served their community well by shining a light on the problem.

- One issue that's near and dear to my heart is spending transparency. Shortly after I unveiled the state's first Spending Transparency Website a few years ago, I launched a campaign to encourage towns, cities, counties and school districts to post their monthly spending reports online. Most of them initially rejected the idea; some dismissed it as being useless while others wrote it off as being too much work.

The idea might never have taken off if not for the individual efforts of citizen-watchdogs in communities across our state.

I remember receiving dozens of phone calls from folks who had heard about the program and wanted to know how to push their local town or county to join. They applied pressure to local politicians, reminding these public officials that spending transparency was easy and inexpensive – as well as good policy.

The fact that 35 cities, towns and counties now voluntarily show their spending records on the Internet is largely a testament to the valuable role these concerned citizens play.

Often, citizen-watchdogs are subjected to scorn and ridicule, even when their actions are in the public interest. It's a time-honored tactic for a governmental entity to try to discredit citizens who point out problems or express dissenting views.

That's a shame. Ordinary folks who take the time to get involved in guiding their community's future should be respected – even cherished.

And those in public office have a particular obligation to ensure that citizen-watchdogs feel free to speak out and ask tough questions. Their involvement ultimately makes your government healthier, which in turn makes your community a better place.

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