

SHOULD GOVERNMENT BE RUN LIKE A BUSINESS?

As town employees you know that working for the public requires dealing with challenges that many others don't understand. Friends and family have probably told all of us that they do things differently in their company or that government should be run more like a business.

While the Town of Hillsborough regularly incorporates business principles into daily operations of its departments, government is not a business! The primary focus of business is to turn a profit. Government is about providing services, which are difficult to charge for, such as fire protection, police, road maintenance, parks and planning.

But government also is responsible for vague, yet real things like community safety, transportation connectivity, open space, sustainability, economic development and other directives found in the town's strategy map. Figuring out these community desires and whether and how to respond to them is far more complicated and abstract than determining whether a business is making a profit. So, the concept of running government like a business certainly sounds good, but there are many important differences.

To complicate matters further, local government employees also must address priorities in such a manner that principles like equity, participation, fairness, public support, public service and highest value for taxpayers' dollars are followed every day. The variety of opinions and perspectives among citizens about what governments should do makes our daily jobs even more challenging.

Dan Fenn, who served in President John F. Kennedy's administration, made a point to emphasize in a lecture I heard that people in government have tough jobs. He thought it was important to remind us that the challenges we face are unique. He noted the following: As government employees, our jobs are designed to be difficult due to checks and balances. This diffusion of power puts power in the hands of the many — the public. The end result is democracy is a terrific system for a free society, but not for the people who work in it.

With that said, there are also many wonderful things about working for a local government, especially in a small town. The two things I'm most grateful for are: I enjoy coming to work every day, and I love living in Hillsborough. One of the primary reasons is because of you, my co-workers and friends. Hillsborough is the fifth municipality I've worked for during my nearly 25 years in local government. The one common theme I've found amongst local government employees and in every municipality I've work for is that the employees are special people. Local government employees work hard; they sincerely try to help the citizens every day, even when those same citizens may unfairly vent and direct their frustrations at us. Local government employees constantly strive to do a good job even when tired, stressed and working through difficult conditions, such as high stress, short staffing, bad weather, disasters, shift work and calls to work nights, weekends and holidays. I've seen the same thing from Town of Hillsborough employees during my 14 years here. There certainly have been exceptions to this rule, but the vast majority of people we work with are indeed special.

I have a great deal of respect and appreciation for the work all of you do. Whenever my daughters or wife ask questions about town services and the many different jobs they see you doing throughout Hillsborough, I am always proud to tell them about the important and excellent work you do. And I'm proud to tell them we are co-workers.

Thank you very much for all you do! Happy New Year!

Eric Peterson is the town manager. Contact him at eric.peterson@hillsboroughnc.org or 919-732-1270 Ext. 80.

