

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Put it in writing!

Just 16 elected officials – seven on Pottstown Council and nine on the Pottstown School Board – control more than \$90 million annually in public spending.

These people are average citizens like we are, most with full-time jobs. Not one is an expert in management or finance. So how can we increase the odds they will make good decisions?

First, the Borough and School District must establish goals and priorities. Then our professional administrators need to gather as much information as possible and provide that information in a clear and concise format. Such written information can be easily shared with the public on Borough and School District Web sites.

Only when each issue is clearly defined, and all pertinent information gathered, can our local elected officials make rational decisions.

The key to all this is simple: Put facts and ideas down in writing. As auto magnate Lee Iacocca noted in his autobiography:

The discipline of writing something down is the first step toward making it happen. In conversation, you can get away with all kinds of nonsense, often without realizing it. But there's something about putting your thoughts on paper that forces you to get down to specifics. That way, it's harder to deceive yourself – or anybody else.

Writing helps people remember pertinent information. That's why we make lists before we go grocery shopping – and why keeping minutes of official government meetings is required by law.

Writing helps us evaluate information and think critically. It forces us to organize our thoughts and provide reasons for our decisions. That's why term papers are a staple of most college courses.

Writing makes us accountable. In the age of high-speed scanners and e-mail, a memo written in Pottstown can be transmitted within minutes to anyone with a computer and an Internet connection. Once you've written something, you can't deny it later.

To encourage excellence in local government, Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government has created a Web site, www.pottstowncitizens.org, that contains a wealth of factual information about the borough government and the school district, together with commentary to help Pottstown citizens understand the issues of the day.

As time goes by, we will be asking our local officials to provide information in writing, which we will share with the public on our Web site. If we want honest, professional government, we have to start by putting things in writing.

Thomas Hylton, a 36-year resident of Pottstown, is treasurer and Web site editor of Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government. He won a Pulitzer Prize during a 22-year career at The Mercury. He left the newspaper in 1994 to write a book and establish a non-profit dedicated to preserving Pennsylvania's towns and countryside.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Summary

- Writing helps us evaluate information and think critically.
- Writing makes us accountable.
- Therefore, Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government will ask questions of our local officials in writing and post the written responses on our Web site