

Dirty Politics on Main Street

By Ty Gee

The campaign manager for a national candidate recently said she would not stoop to tactics she would regret because, on November 3, she would have to "live with" herself. That's the proper approach even to politics. For politicians who don't have that internalized compass, citizens have a role: we should make them "live with" their campaign misconduct.

When newspapers provide the facts, citizens can hold politicians accountable at the polling booth. But Louisville's Ballot Issue 200, which citizens overwhelmingly approved, gives citizens an opportunity to hold politicians accountable even when their campaign misconduct fails at the ballot box.

Issue 200 adds open-government amendments to the Louisville Charter. Council opposition to Issue 200 was led by Mayor Chuck Sisk and council member Don Brown. The tactics used by the council opposition—from beginning to end—were inappropriate and wrong.

Ignoring citizens. In January, 20 Louisville citizens, including current and former public officials, asked city officials to work with them on concerns about open government. Not a single council member responded. That's what led to Issue 200.

Using the city manager and scare tactics. City Manager Bill Simmons is an unelected government official charged with running the city's daily business. No such official should use city resources to try to influence an election. But that's what Mr. Simmons did.

After Mayor Sisk asked about Issue 200's "cost," Mr. Simmons gave council members what he knew they wanted to hear: a manufactured "cost estimate" designed to scare voters. His estimate of "\$81,000" in costs included the purchase of bulletin boards at \$560 each to post meeting notices, \$9,000 a year to prepare

Citizen initiative met unfair tactics on open government

minutes, and more than \$65,000 other costs not required by Issue 200.

The council seized on these "costs" to paint a false picture of dire financial consequences if Issue 200 were approved. The council opposition said Issue 200's "cost" would harm programs "that mean a great deal to Louisville, including recreation center operations, senior citizen programs, and the library." Council member Brown piled on, suggesting that public officials would be "prosecuted" if they inadvertently failed to attend an open-government workshop required under the amendments.

It turned out these council she-nanigans did scare citizens. But not in the way the council opposition had hoped. In the end, the council damaged its own credibility.

Using the League of Women Voters voters guide. The League does not check the accuracy of statements made for and against a ballot issue. The council opposition deliberately gave misinformation to the League. In addition to claiming Issue 200 would result in "substantial financial expense," the council opposition falsely said citizens would be "punished" because the Charter amendments would prevent them from giving information to public bodies, and would "threaten officials with sanction if they err in good faith," something even the city attorney had dismissed.

Using the city newsletter. In past elections when local issues are on the ballot, the City includes information about them in its fall newsletter. That didn't happen this time, except in the mayor's column. Mayor Sisk there cautioned citizens that they "should read very carefully" the amendments to understand "the total potential impact on our city." (My italics.) Notably, while Mayor Sisk mentioned FasTracks, which he publicly supported, he did not urge voters to read FasTracks

"very carefully" or to consider its "total potential impact on our city." Nor was there such a statement in the newsletter when the City Charter itself was on the 2001 ballot.

Attacking the right of citizens to amend the Charter. After Election Day, Mayor Sisk called Issue 200 proponents to congratulate them and say he would embrace Issue 200's provisions. That was a class act.

Then there was Councilmember Brown. On Election Day, he attacked Issue 200's proponents: "This is a small cadre of individuals trying to run government, but they're not willing to step up or run for office." This attack by a two-term councilmember—suggesting that only those who "run for office" have a legitimate voice in "running government"—discloses a sad lack of knowledge about the very government he claims elected officials "run."

This country was founded—by a "small cadre of individuals"—on the principle that government officials "derive their just powers from the consent of the governed." When citizens act, they are "stepping up" in a way far more important than "running for office." We the People do "run government"—through our participation, including by amending charters and electing public servants. No one should disrespect public servants who faithfully fulfill their role in our democracy, but there is no arrogance more offensive than for a public servant to disrespect the People on Election Day.

Now, with the election over, when public officials must face reality, citizens should continue to hold them accountable for their campaign misconduct. Elections are not games in which politicians are free to fling mud and misinformation at citizens and then, when the election is over, carry on as if their hands are clean. Citizens have an important role in cleaning dirty politics. We should start in our communities.

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