

Evaluate Where We Are and Get Engaged

By Ron Woody, Roane County Executive

Generally during the coming of a new year and the passing of the old year, we often evaluate our lives and what we are trying to accomplish in life. As county leaders, we reflect also on what we accomplished, what we failed to accomplish, what decisions we made that we consider good decisions and what we consider not so good decisions. As we evaluate the past, we also focus on the future.

Let's first talk about the recent property tax bills. Some were very painful. My own property taxes increased. I wish that had not happened and I know that others went up even higher. Why did it happen? Will it happen again? As most know, the majority of the increase supported our education programs. We could debate for days and weeks whether we should have forced major changes in education even to the point of not starting the school year and closing some schools permanently. It was a tough decision for our county leaders and the thing about this decision is that it will have to be made again. Maybe not in the next few years, but I have never seen the cost of education decrease. Many of our citizens supported the increase and many did not, but education was funded again. Now is the time for education leaders, commission and the general public to get engaged in the decision process for the future years.

I was blessed to be able to ring the bell for the Salvation Army during the month of December at Kroger. I heard several comments about the county tax bills. To my surprise, I had a gentleman that made the comment to me, "I know you probably haven't heard this comment, but I wish you all would raise taxes every year." I said, "I'm betting you haven't gotten your tax bill this year yet." He said he had received the tax bill and owns several properties, but believes we should pay our employees well and that we have a great county in which we live and the taxes are worth the services. Yes, that was a comment I had not heard. As one can see, we have different opinions within our county.

Not all comments have been positive as a variety of my fellow church members commented on what do we get for our tax dollars and why did my taxes double? Folks, it is not easy and our commission and I struggled with our decisions. I suggest you should be engaged in the process, but realize that it is not as easy as a "no new taxes" decision.

A couple of months ago, I had a conversation with another of my fellow church members about the Governor's Insure Tennessee Initiative. The conversation went something like this. I said that since you support Insure Tennessee would you vote against me if I don't support it? The answer back to me was, "Yes, I would vote against you next time." I responded that I think that is one of the main problems with operation of government. That problem being we as citizens are often one issue individuals. You could have a great leader but because that leader differs from you on one issue, we often choose to try to vote that person out of office. And citizens wonder why our elected officials will not stand on an issue? I hope my fellow church member will rethink this mindset and realize that a single issue should not dictate the way we solve our problems. Becoming one issue voters and having the "throw the bums out" mentality will not make government better.

One more example of government management which I will share is a conversation I had with my father a couple of years ago. He was struggling with understanding why we were having financial problems in Roane County's education system. I said dad I'm glad you're still alive (he is now 80), but the retirement

experts never believed back in the 50s, 60s and 70s that our workforce would live as long as you and your fellow retired teachers have. You enjoy a retirement, and it may not be much, but it had to last at least a decade or two longer than anticipated. (This same situation impacted the auto, steel, railroads and many other industries who dealt with it over two decades ago.) Anyway to finish the story, the state retirement increased one year from 7% to 9% which is only a 2% increase in costs but for a \$40,000,000 payroll, that is an \$800,000 increase in the budget.

I hope your 2015 was a blessed year and that your 2016 will be even better. Get engaged in your local government because that is the way to make government better. We need all the help you can lend, but please don't get hung up on the concept that "no new taxes" is always the correct answer or that throwing all the bums out is always the best solution. There are many issues which face our communities that need to be solved and the biggest cost in government is for education and paying for citizens that are not responsible to civic duties. A big thank you goes out to our responsible citizens who obey the law, pick up other people's trash and contribute to making society better.

Roane County Government's work, accomplishments, and plans can be found on the county website www.roanecountytn.gov under County Executive.