

May 31, 2017

It's a Difficult Decision and It Should Be

In my last two articles, I addressed some financial aspects of a Capital Improvement Plan, the timing of making capital investments, and the borrowing of monies for those investments. After the first article was published, I heard from supporters in favor of consolidation, as if I was against the plan. The title of the second article was changed by the newspaper, and it implied that I supported the consolidation plan. Both perceptions are not accurate. One never knows what title the newspaper will put on an article, so please don't take the title to mean the author's intent. Here is the title I would use for this article, "It's a Difficult Decision and It Should Be."

Borrowing money should always be a difficult decision, whether it's personal, business related or borrowing by your government. Major capital project investments should be difficult decisions. I addressed capital improvements and borrowing for assets to be used for 30 years. Folks, we could be making a decision about assets that should last for 30 plus years and definitely, we will be paying principal and interest for 30 years. We do not need to be rushing our decision-making process.

Here are a few comments I have heard over the past several months: "This Commission needs to make the decision, because this Commission would support the school consolidation program." I am not sure I agree with that statement. Never the less, if this Commission did support the consolidation then the only way to approve the project is to approve borrowing the funds. In the absence of approved borrowing of funds, each commission meeting could result in a different decision with a different vote. "If you build a consolidated school, people will move into the community which will grow the community, look at Hardin Valley." I am not so sure I agree. I believe Knox County built the school, because of a need for a school. I don't believe Knox County went out and said we need to grow our community in this area of the county, so let's build a school. Has the City of Oak Ridge grown over the last 5-7 years after their \$50 million plus investment in their high school?

We can debate comments like these and others, but I hope we can agree that there are many aspects that make a healthy, vibrant, growing, and sustainable community. It requires a balanced approach. Here are a few aspects: adequate infrastructure of water, sewer, electricity, natural gas and transportation systems; good institutions of communities, workforce, businesses, schools (secondary, higher education and vocational trade), safe environments, recreation opportunities, and also sound tax policies and reasonable tax burdens.

I heard a quote one time that said, "In the best financial times we tend to make the worst decisions." Not judging whether a good or bad decision was made with the TVA ash spill money, but I will say the decisions were made in a short period of time.

On my desk, I have three survey reports of Schools in Roane County. The 1959 report is 200 pages. The 1968 report is 235 pages and the 1987 report is 37 pages. All of the reports examine various aspects of facilities, enrollments, projections and finances of these schools. As I have stated since the first discussions on this issue started last year. I firmly believe in order to be good stewards of tax payers money, students' education and Roane County's future, it is imperative that a deliberate and thoughtful process be used to make the difficult decisions facing us. This process requires that questions be asked and answered about more than the number of high schools in Roane County. When the question

became what the future of Roane County's education should look like, I wrote an article about a decision making process where questions were asked and answered. To go just a little further, we should ponder on the positive and negative aspects of our potential decisions. Our staff writes newsletters, executive summaries, and newspaper articles not only to help our communities understand the issues, but to also help us make better decision.

It is said of the "Father of the Nuclear Navy", Admiral Hyman Rickover, that he had stringent standards and a powerful focus on achievement. He was known to write down problems, issues and potential solutions because when you write things down it helps us focus and clarify the situation.

What are the advantages (intended consequences) and disadvantages (potential unintended consequences) of the decisions we are trying to make. Remember, we will have to live with the decisions for 30 years or more. These are difficult decisions but they should be, because they are important, these decisions deserve the time and attention necessary to ask all the questions and to write down all the answers before final decisions are made.

Our office patiently waits for a report that examines Roane County's educational needs such as, a curriculum, operational budget and a surplus plan.

Other articles about County Government, Education, and Finance are available on the County Website at www.roanecountytn.gov, under the County Executives page, published articles and speeches.