



When I told my editor that my next column was going to focus on the public policy imperative, he said, “Great idea!”

It should be noted that the editor works for me and says much the same thing before each upcoming issue of Chamber Executive. But because we have spoken occasionally about the book I wrote almost 20 years ago, “Making Your Chamber Make a Difference,” and because he is in close contact with so

many policy-focused ACCE members, I think he is genuinely supportive this time.

My book about chamber government relations wasn’t half bad in its time, but today the political and media references in the book must seem just short of nostalgically cute to Xers and alien to millennials. Grassroots fax campaigns, writers for local newspapers focused on business issues, legislative staffers of different parties playing softball on the same team ... Awe! How sweet!

When they aren’t picking on me, the younger staffers at ACCE admit that several of the book’s chapters have held up through the years. The thing they found most valid and lasting is the assertion that active engagement in public policy is much more than an optional program or check-box item in a three-year strategic plan.

The ACCE members who are most in tune with the messages contained in the Horizon Initiative know instinctively the eight powerful influences coming at us in the coming decade will make active public policy engagement and leadership more essential.

Ironically and tragically, some chamber professionals see the fragmentation of politics, the scarcity of volunteer leaders, the whims of economic markets, and the reality of demographics as reasons to throw up their hands and give up on lobbying (large “L” or small) and activism. Others seem determined that issues such as education and regulatory reform should be addressed solely through chamber programming.

The fact is, government frequently has to be moved in major and modest ways. The body politic will be impacted by someone’s ideas – will the someone be you? Some organization’s priorities will find their way into legislation. A community college will add or drop courses based on something a new dean calls “public pressure.” Every county executive will make decisions about development projects or zoning based upon input from influential people, not just empirical evidence.

The question is not about whether dogged advocacy will influence the prospects for your community. It is about who will be doin’ the advocatin’.

A good many of you reading this column will finish with a moment of self-satisfaction. You will be convinced you are doing all you can, or at least all you dare, to shape public policy.

But there’s more that must be done.

Considering the source of this message, you might harbor a resentment or two. After all, ACCE doesn’t lobby. Fleming doesn’t work issues on the Hill or elsewhere. “Where does Mick get off telling me that my organization must make policy activism an ‘imperative?’ Does he even know how godawful hard it is to forge a position, line up support and take the political/business risks required to be bold on these issues?”

Yes, I do know firsthand, but that is irrelevant. In the immortal words of Don Corleone, “this is strictly business.” If you aren’t an active advocate, the winds described in the Horizon report will destabilize or swamp your boat. If chambers sink, it will be bad for everyone’s business – yours, mine and our nation’s.

It is easy to measure the financial loss resulting from taking strong positions and hard to measure the loss from failure to do so. But those hard-to-measure losses are greater in the long term. If you “sit this one out” (and that one and the next one) you lose important progress for your community, clout that is important to all your members, and “asking rights” with large employers. The public policy imperative is strictly business.

On a recent road trip to Ohio, I heard a great story from Michael McDorman, president of the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce. He told me about his bold gamble when a school district was getting ready to bulldoze a legacy high school, which the business community was trying to convert to a much-needed STEM school. In the final stage of lobbying to keep and transform the building, the chamber exec advised school board members that when the wreckers showed up to tear brick landmark down, they might just find him chained to the front door with cameras rolling.

Today, that STEM school is a model for the state and nation. A half-dozen international educators have come to see its creative approach to science, math and general learning. 3-D printers hum in after-hours programs. Students have taken a lab project to the basement, where they are growing potatoes as Matt Damon did in “The Martian.” A pop music icon has stepped forward to transform the historic school theater. The school has become the celebrated beacon of hope for a community that had been shedding younger residents for decades.

Oh yeah, and numbers at the Greater Springfield Chamber are the best they’ve been in decades.

At this particular time in our history, you can seem insane when you choose to embrace the “sane center” described in the Horizon Initiative. Indeed it would be insane to stake out the political center among the various -isms (conservatism, liberalism, populism, libertarianism), but that’s not what is being asked of you. To be an active sane advocate, you can find and push for logical, data-driven compromise on the individual issues that affect profitability for your members today and prosperity for your community tomorrow.

From a business perspective, it would be insane not to. That’s why your community, town, chamber, and national professional organization hope you will continue ... onward.

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