

?Brown and Mishler welcome challenges and opportunities

Written by

Wednesday, 14 January 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 January 2009 10:54

? In separate luncheon interviews, new Washington County Board of Commissioners (BOC) members David Brown and John Mishler addressed what they see as the greatest opportunities and obstacles the county will be faced with over the next several years. Identical questions were asked of each Commissioner and those questions along with the respective answers are as follows:

How much does party affiliation come into play in county government?

Brown: Once in office, it means very little. John (Mishler) and I are Republicans and Lana (Sullivan) is a Democrat. But we are all residents of Washington County and have to work together. Party affiliation has nothing to do with that cooperation.

Mishler: As far as local political office is concerned, I don't think it makes that much difference. I expect that all three Commissioners will be able to work together for the good of Washington County. After all, we're all in the same boat—it's not like we have to deal with hot button issues like abortion.

What is the greatest challenge and opportunity facing Washington County that the BOC will have to deal with over the next four years?

Brown: Learning to live within our means by not overspending while at the same time making sure that the money we do spend is spent wisely.

Mishler: The greatest challenge we are going to face will come from the economic slow down and the expected decrease in tax revenues. I have concerns about maintaining county services if this recession goes on for a prolonged period of time.

The greatest opportunity I see is to do things to encourage economic development such as a land use plan and a long term county wide strategy for economic development. We haven't been very successful in replacing the economic loss from Smith Cabinet. That should have been a wake up call to the community.

What do you hope to look back at in four years as the biggest accomplishment of your term?

Brown: For me that is easy--I want to be able to say that we spent money according to the rules, find a way to work in a productive and professional manner with the County Council, and, last but not least, get everyone in Washington County to see themselves as part of one larger community rather than a bunch of smaller communities throughout the county.

Mishler: I hope to see an efficient county wide land use plan in place as well as an culture in which county government is fiscally responsible and follows the law when it comes to spending.

I would like to see an improvement in the working relationship among the members of the Board of Commissioner—getting away from this two against one pattern that has been present in the past few years. I also want to see that the Commissioners and the County Council work together in a professional manner for the good of the community.

Finally, I want to look back at the end of this term and see that the State Board of Accounts has not written up us up for violating Indiana code regarding spending practices.

What do you see as the most pressing issues that the BOC will have to deal with in

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the first part of 2009?

Brown: As I said earlier, learning to live withing the budget approved by the County Council and following the rules about not spending money from overdrawn funds.

I also see that a decision is going to have to be made very soon regarding the Veterans Affair Office and the Emergency Management Office.

Mishler: I believe that we must focus on two areas immediately. One is the land use plan and the second is the way in which we spend money as a county government.

I see several other issues that should be dealt within the next four years but these two are the ones that I see as the most pressing considering the dwindling tax revenues and the serious problems homeowners in some parts of the county have with declining property values.

As a newly elected official, how would you respond to the accusation that Washington County Government is not responsive to the will of the people?

Brown: I always want to see evidence when someone makes an accusation. There are people who make claims in the media but fail to provide proof or evidence of those claims. I'm not saying that the accusation is false—I would just like to have some specific examples to support it before I comment.

Mishler: I think that one of the most difficult problems in a small community is that people will spread misinformation either by word-of-mouth or in local media and are not held accountable for it because they make the statement or accusation anonymously.

I cannot speak for past elected officials but if I am ever accused of not being responsible to the electorate then I would want examples and proof, not just an accusation.

What is your position on implementing some sort of a land use or zoning plan for Washington County?

Brown: I believe some sort of a comprehensive, county wide, land management plan must be implemented if we expect Washington County to grow in a responsible and sustainable fashion. Purdue University says that "spot zoning" is counterproductive and doesn't address the problems of encouraging development and economic growth while at the same time protecting the interests of farmers and current home owners. When the time comes to look at this issue, I would be in favor of having a representative from each of the townships in the county to sit on the committee that develops the land management plan.

Mishler: That is the primary issue I ran on. I support a land use plan. Salem seems to have success with its zoning strategies. If fact, I would like to see if a county land use plan could be integrated with Salem's plan as well as other towns in the county. That way, we would have a comprehensive strategy that could be administrated uniformly anywhere in the county.

Why do you suppose there has been so much opposition to such a plan in the past?

Brown: I think that most people don't understand concept and are afraid that it would restrict them from doing what they want to do with their land.

Mishler: I think most people just don't understand it. Back in the early 1990s there was so much misinformation in newspaper ads and hearsay conversation that people thought zoning

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would mean something like living in a Communist state. There were even newspaper ads that said a landowner would not be allowed to put up a fence on his property. Unfortunately, many people believe everything they read in the newspaper or see on television and the internet. This time I hope we do a better job of informing people.

What, if any, changes do you plan to support in the way that county finances have been monitored and administered; specifically, the practice of writing checks on funds that have negative balances?

Brown: Like I said in a previous answer, we have to play by the rules. It is illegal to spend money from funds that have zero or negative balances. It's not that difficult to go back to the County Council and following the correct procedures, such as transferring funds to cover the expenses. That is one of the reasons I ran for office.

Mishler: We must follow the state statutes about spending practices. I will not support spending from any fund that does not have the money to cover the check. I will ask the County Auditor if there is money in the fund before I vote to pay any claim. If there is not money in the fund, then the Commissioners are suppose to go back to the Council to make the necessary moves to put money in the fund. It's not that difficult to play by the rules.

What ideas/strategies do you have in mind for bringing together the separate communities within the county that are primarily defined by school districts?

Brown: I think the discussion of a land use plan is a good step to bring people together from difference parts of the county with different views but common interest.

I also think that organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, the Growth Partnership, Hometown Competitiveness, and Washington County Awareness can play a crucial role in getting people to rethink the idea of community to mean Washington County not just their geographic community.

Mishler: If done correctly, the implementation of the land use plan will bring together people from all areas of the county and all walks of life. One of the best ways to bring about unity is for people to work on a project that is beneficial to everyone.

Over the last few years, it is safe to say that the working relationship between the Board of Commissioners and the Washington County Council has been strained. What do you see as the obstacles that must be overcome to make that relationship more cooperative and less adversarial?

Brown: If the Commissioners will show the appropriate respect for the role of the County Council and get approval for needed changes in the budget, then much of the past problems will be solved. Again, everyone just needs to play by the rules.

Mishler: In all honesty, I think that has only been the case in the last few years. If everyone will follow the rules about spending practices, much of the conflict will be eliminated.

What is your position on the best and/or most appropriate use of County Economic Development Income Tax (CEDIT) revenues?

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Brown: CEDIT money needs to be used for what is was intended—projects and activities that encourage economic growth. That might be roads, utility lines, recruitment efforts, or any other projects that helps to grow the economy and potential of Washington County.

Mishler: I think the earmarking of 25% of CEDIT money for non-road work economic development usage was a step in the right direction. As I said earlier, when Smith Cabinet left Salem that should have been the point when we ramped up our efforts and our spending for economic development. I think there might have been a few false starts for the (Washington County Economic Growth) Partnership but that should not keep us from making every effort we can to recruit employers and encouraging entrepreneurs to growth their businesses. A good model to look at is Tell City and Perry County—they pulled off a miracle there.

Being one of the largest counties in the state in terms of square miles and miles of county maintained roads per capita, what ideas do you have for seeing to it that roads are maintained without taking away funds from other vital services and programs?

Brown: I think we have a very good Highway Superintendent in Rick Graves. I trust him to see that wise decisions are made about which roads are a priority when it comes to repairs. Here again, staying within the approved budget is a necessity for the Highway Department as well as all other county departments.

Mishler: Being one of the largest counties in the state and having approximately 900 miles of roads makes it a difficult job to keep them all maintained. We are going to have to look at each section of road and determine if it is priority. With the high price of asphalt and less money to work with, we have to be very selective.