



Burst the bubbles

You see it every legislative session after about the first 30 days, when the glory wears off and the grinding work settles in. Long days that stretch into the evening hours in “the building” with the same people—electeds, staff, lobbyists—lead to an unwholesome familiarity. In the bubble, legislators develop an extravagant sense of self-worth and sacrifice, reinforced by lobbyists with agendas. It’s not healthy.

The advent of social media has made the bubble more impermeable. Legislators compete for attention within their closed bubble world, while the rest of us roll our eyes and wonder why they waste so much time on ingratiating posts that clog up Twitter feeds and pump up already inflated egos.

At the local level, we see the same bubble phenomena although it’s taken a rather unusual twist lately. Council members use social media relentlessly to promote themselves. But when constituents offer critiques of their actions, or lack thereof, they are often met with a response

of, “Well, what are *you* doing about it?”—as if people could suddenly transform themselves into policymakers with a vote.

It’s true that constituents have never had such easy and public access to their representatives. And while a private phone call or letter is easy to ignore, on social media, one is held accountable to a much broader audience—and a hasty, unfiltered response can be shared widely. Social media is a great opportunity to engage people in an honest dialogue about community challenges. But, within the bubble, criticism is taken much too personally by elected officials, and their responses often devolve into defensiveness and even condescension. Nonetheless, elected officials must listen to everyone, especially constituents who are upset with the city’s direction.

Mayor Hillary Schieve’s recent Town Hall on housing is another example of a political leader reacting defensively to criticism while missing an opportunity to engage productively with constituents who are understandably appalled and frightened

by the increasingly dire housing situation in Reno. Schieve assembled a panel of builders, developers and city officials to talk about their challenges and success in producing housing for our struggling community. She told participants that not enough attention has been paid to all the wonderful things that the City has been doing to address the crisis and said she wanted to share the Council’s accomplishments because they’ve “been overshadowed a lot by negativity.”

Predictably, the developer panelists who live in a bubble of their own, complained about red tape and building codes while those in the audience wanted to talk about rent control and all the luxury apartments being built instead of affordable units. One advocate for the homeless, Lisa Lee, left the Town Hall feeling dissatisfied, telling a reporter “I felt it was a waste of time. I’d like to hear from the real experts on housing: people surviving despite the miserable housing shortage and inflated prices.”

Nevada’s neighbors are doing much more to protect tenants from egregious rent hikes caused by a tight housing market. California just passed a statewide anti-rent gouging bill, holding landlords to no more than a five percent plus inflation increase each year and added protections against no-cause evictions, legislation that was supported by their landlord association. Oregon now has a seven percent plus inflation annual cap. But in Nevada, local and state officials argue about who has the power to address outrageous rent hikes while residents live in constant fear of the next dramatic and arbitrary rent increase.

Instead of responding defensively to unhappy constituents, local officials should get out of their self-reinforcing bubble and respectfully engage the community. Figure out what can be done to protect our renters. Accept that citizens aren’t always going to be your cheerleaders. Holding government accountable is actually a much tougher job. □



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