

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Competing in the marketplace of ideas

A year ago, I began publishing columns such as this one in *The Mercury* as paid advertisements.

These columns are designed to inform readers about important local issues and to influence public opinion. I try to achieve these goals by demonstrating a clear command of the facts, coupled with sound reasoning, in order to "sell" ideas I believe worthy of public consideration.

As a fond alumnus of *The Mercury* from 1971 to 1994, I hope to achieve some other goals as well: generate revenue for my hometown newspaper (more than \$10,000 so far this year) and encourage discussion.

When I launched this unusual enterprise, I expected it would provoke criticism. And *The Mercury's* Web site, which allows anyone to give himself a moniker and comment anonymously, has made that easier than ever. In fact, many people write voluminous comments, for free, while I pay for a fixed space.

Some criticism has been constructive, and some destructive, and much of it has been accompanied by generous helpings of personal abuse. So be it. People should speak as they find, and I am grateful to live in a country where exercising my freedom of speech isn't going to cost me a jail term or a bullet in the head. Besides, as Benjamin Franklin wrote:

...such Enemies do a Man some good, while they think they are doing him harm, by fortifying the Character they would destroy; for when he sees how readily imaginary Faults and Crimes are laid to his Charge, he must be more apprehensive of the Danger of committing real Ones, as he can expect no Quarter, and therefore is more on his Guard to avoid or at least to conceal them.

As an excellent businessman, Franklin was able to retire from active moneymaking at age 42 and devote himself thereafter to public service.

Thanks to a supportive wife who earned an excellent salary and benefits (and now

pension) as a teacher in the Pottstown School District, I was able to retire from the newspaper business at age 46 and devote myself full-time to public service.

I founded a non-profit, wrote a book, and produced a public television documentary about ways we can preserve our towns and countryside. I have given nearly 450 talks in 35 states advocating for traditional towns that house people of all ages, races, and incomes.

I have raised a little more than \$1 million for this cause over the last 15 years, but I have kept my personal expenses low — less than \$15,000 a year. And the board of the non-profit has paid me just \$40,000 in stipends during that time — an average of less than \$3,000 per year.

I have accepted these stipends as personal income (on which, of course, I pay taxes) in order to cover expenses, like this column, which do not qualify as a legitimate non-profit activity.

I keep a wall of separation between the non-profit and my other activities, which is why I have never written the name of the non-profit in this column or on its related Web site.

This column is written on behalf of Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government, which is a political committee registered with the Montgomery County Office of Voter Services in accordance with state law. It is 100 percent funded by my wife and me. All receipts and expenditures are filed with the Office of Voter Services.

I am co-founder and treasurer of Trees Inc., chairman of the Pottstown Shade Tree Commission; member and former chairman of the Pottstown Planning Commission; and will be sworn in Thursday as a member of the Pottstown School Board.

Yesterday, I wrote that each person has his own unique talents and purpose in life. I have tried to use my skills both for advocating and for doing. These columns are part of that effort. Freedom of speech is a precious right, and the more we exercise it, the stronger our community becomes.

This column expresses the personal views of Tom Hylton and does not represent the views of any public or private organization with which he is affiliated.



Commentary by
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