

## Lessons Learned During the Legislative Session

For the past few weeks, we have been hearing about the lessons which our local state representatives say they learned during the legislative session. From the perspective of one who spent weeks at the capitol lobbying for policies regarding public safety, there are some other lessons which I believe everyone should have learned.

Lesson #1: *“Don’t ask a poor man for money”*

In December, months before the legislative session started, the State Equalization Board reported that there would be no new money and less of the old money to fund state government services in 2017. The dye was cast months before the budget was approved the last week of May. Knowing this, those that wanted more money needed to be strongly advocating where to find the funds they wanted. Asking for it is easy. Finding it proved much harder. This usually resulted in “Peter trying to rob Paul”. It’s only going to get worse as the prediction for next year is another budget hole large enough to swallow some agencies. So the debate should be: “is the state government the only place that can provide this service or even have the answers?”

Lesson #2: *“You’re better off asking for a fishing pole than a fish”*

Once you learn lesson #1, then it’s better to ask for tools to do the job yourself the best you can. Asking for legislative permission or authorization to try new methods of funding and service delivery so local governments can do the job of providing services has to be done. Local control of local funding for local services has to be expanded. As Washington shifts responsibilities back to the states, states need to do more to shift the ways, if not the means, back to cities and counties. Let local citizens and elected officials make their own decisions because it’s their communities and their money. The Legislature has to stop trying to be everything for everyone and thinking they know better than leaders at the local level on how to fix the problems. It’s time to diminish the legislature of some of its power and return the power to govern back to the people who will do what’s right for themselves.

Lesson #3:           *“If you can’t make a bigger pie then change the size of the pieces”*

The revenue pie is not going to get bigger. So to support needed services is going to require re-cutting the pieces of the pie. What’s needed is more of a reallocation of the pie than a guaranteed same size piece. As an example, Career Tech is the only local entity that gets a guaranteed amount of ad valorem for a building fund. Whether they need more buildings or not, they get this dedicated source of tax revenue. Perhaps that millage should be reallocated to public education and when Career Tech does need new buildings they, like the public schools, have to go before the voters for approval. With a re-cutting of the pie, everyone will get something which may be less but equitable. And, following lesson #2, give more power back to the local level. Ideas that may not be supported by the rural areas should not stop cities from using them and vice a versa. Citizens didn’t surrender their power to be governed to the legislature – they share it.

Lesson #4:           *“The biggest special interest group in government is the government”*

When people think of “special interest groups” they think of entities outside of government attempting to influence the government decision making process. But the largest special interest group is the government itself. Numerous agencies have publicly funded lobbyist, legislative staff, and a well-entrenched bureaucracy that often times have long standing relationships and friendships with legislators. As a result, agencies that resist the changing reality have a powerful effect on state government policies and practices.

Terry Simonson  
Director of Governmental Affairs  
Tulsa County