

Tough Times Listening Tour (Part 2)

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Right before the holidays I participated in another listening session with North Carolina officials to gather ideas for the Tough Times Training Committee. [Here](#) is a link to my post about earlier listening sessions. I had a breakfast meeting in Raleigh with members of the Executive Committee of the NC Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) Board of Directors. Here's who attended: Mary Accor (Cleveland County), Joe Bryan (Wake County), Brian McMahan (Jackson County), and Kenneth Edge (Cumberland County). David Thompson, Executive Director of NCACC, also joined in the conversation. It was a diverse and thoughtful group.



Mary Accor, Joe Bryan, Brian McMahan, Kenneth Edge

I began by talking about our budget cuts and how we have responded, and I also thanked them (profusely) for paying their membership dues. Then I asked how their counties have been affected by the economic downturn and how we might help them respond to their challenges through new or expanded training. It was a wide-ranging conversation and here are a few of their comments.

Three of the commissioners talked movingly about how local leadership is becoming harder and harder because citizens have less trust in their leaders. People are losing their jobs and struggling in other ways—they are afraid and they don't believe that local leaders are going to help them. This perception is supported by [a recent Elon University Poll](#), which showed that 65% of the people polled believe that “elected officials are more concerned for themselves than the best interest of the public” Polls have shown for a long time that people don't trust federal officials, but this one seems to show that “[m]any North Carolinians blame elected officials for the discrepancies in the budget and handling of finances on a state and local level.” How can local officials break



through those attitudes to communicate effectively with their constituents and help them get through these tough times? How do they communicate the need for the county to make certain infrastructure and capital investments at a time when so many individuals are suffering? How do we deal with this crisis?

In terms of how we offer our training, one commissioner indicated that he prefers to learn face-to-face rather than through webinars, though I don't think he has had much experience with webinars. His comment resulted in a suggestion that the School demonstrate a webinar and how it works at one or more NCACC meetings. The basic idea is to give county commissioners who might be reluctant to participate in a webinar a positive experience that will break down potential resistance based on fears and misperceptions. I made it clear that we don't consider webinars ideal for everything, but that it is good when trying to convey certain kinds of information.

A couple of the commissioners expressed strong interest in a leadership academy that challenges their beliefs and pushes them hard to examine their thinking. They specifically referred to their positive experience attending the [County Leadership Institute](#) at the Wagner School of Public Service at New York University, which is offered in partnership with the National Association of Counties (NACo). The program is led by [Marty Linsky from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard](#), and who uses his book [The Practice of Adaptive Leadership](#). Two commissioners at the meeting have attended the Institute, and so have a couple of others from North Carolina. The content of the course is not entirely clear, but my impression is that it goes beyond anything that we have done with elected officials—and possibly beyond what we have tried to do with the Public Executive Leadership Academy (PELA). Donna Warner is going to learn more from one of the commissioners who has gone through the Wagner School program. Because it is a national program that only accepts a small number of students, it means that only a handful of North Carolina commissioners have the opportunity to participate. They would love to see us offer a program that would give a similar experience to many more of our county commissioners.

A number of other issues were identified either by the commissioners or David Thompson. How can the county commissioners work more effectively with school boards? Can we offer more training for county commissioners on conflict resolution? What are the differences between county and municipal responsibilities? Can we do something to help counties, especially the smaller, poorer counties, understand their fiscal condition and anticipate problems before they happen? I talked about the terrific tool that has been created by Greg Allison, Bill Rivenbark, and Dale Roenigk to help elected officials and others analyze and track the fiscal condition of their local government.

I find these sessions worthwhile for a couple of reasons. The commissioners and David Thompson are interested in sharing their ideas, and they seem grateful that I am meeting with them and asking for their input. Another reason is that they have good ideas for training that would be helpful to them. There is no substitute for asking people what they want from us, and we need to be responsive. I am scheduled to do more of these sessions, and then Tough Times Committee will



develop regional training proposals that are tailored to meet the needs of public officials as they struggle to manage during these challenging times.



David Thompson