

Onus on us for “Arizona We Want”

by R.W. "Skip" Kistner - Oct. 17, 2009
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It is a godsend to Arizonans to see the focus of political leadership shift from the dysfunctional ideological battles of the Legislature - Republicans vs. Democrats, conservatives vs. liberals - to the experienced leadership of individuals like Lattie Coor, Michael Crow and former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who have been devising the architecture for a financial, educational and cultural renaissance for Arizona's 21st century.

The report "The Arizona We Want," sponsored by the Center for Arizona's Future, reveals that, while a majority of Arizonans love the beauty, history and values of our state, only 10 to 15 percent believe elected officials represent their interests.

According to the Gallup Poll, the quality Arizonans most want in their leaders is the ability to grasp complex problems and to solve them creatively. The clear inference is that this is precisely the capability many of our state politicians lack.

Residents watched in horror as effective leadership was trumped by a blind dedication to political ideology in the Legislature this past year. We witnessed a paralyzing polarity between the two parties and the governor, a paralysis that killed any hope for necessary legislation.

As residents suffered from a lack of social services, politicians battled and bickered. That's not what Arizonans want. That's not the leadership we need.

Fortunately, sensing this leadership void, Arizonans such as Coor, Crow and O'Connor have been about the business of defining our problems and devising plans to solve them.

In the Gallup Poll, the diverse voices of Arizonans have listed the agenda:

- Generate more quality jobs.
- Prepare students for the jobs of the future.
- Create sources of renewable energy.
- Build a sustainable infrastructure.
- Develop leaders who can work across party lines to find solutions to complex problems.

Of course, unless Arizona can meet the fifth goal of developing progressive leaders - that is, non-ideological leaders who focus on progress - the first four goals will never be achieved. Fortunately, Crow and O'Connor have begun.

At ASU, Crow has introduced the "Challenges Before Us" educational initiative. Faculty/student teams will devise solutions to global and local problems in areas such as public health and environmental stewardship, sparking economic prosperity.

Educational research indicates that students at all levels learn best when they are acquiring a knowledge and skill base that they can then immediately use to solve problems.

The desire to solve problems creatively by working with others toward a common goal has been the defining characteristic of human beings since early humans discovered ways to use the earliest tools to build hunting parties and create agricultural villages. It's in our DNA. This kind of learning is precisely what Crow's initiative inspires.

Developing leaders needs to start early. Studies by the Carnegie Corp. indicate that middle- and high-school students in the U.S. don't receive the educational foundation in civics necessary to empower them to be responsible citizens. Most American teenagers cannot name the three branches of government.

To address this challenge, O'Connor has created a project to foster the teaching of civics. "By teaching civics in a manner that emphasizes participation, we hope to get students in the game, so they understand that voting and involvement matter in terms of creating good outcomes for this country," O'Connor said.

And that is the common purpose of the Coor, Crow and O'Connor initiatives: to inspire all Arizonans, young and old, conservative and liberal, to get into the game as involved and informed residents, ready to carry out the new agenda.

We can no longer count on the politicians alone. It's up to all of us. We must all become the leaders Arizona needs.

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