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Kevin Lake: Whether to approve PILOT? That's wrong question

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Thursday, November 19, 2015

(Published in print: Friday, November 20, 2015)

NORTHAMPTON — After attending one of the Mayor David J. Narkewicz's community meetings about his proposed PILOT program and reading what I can find about it, I wrote the mayor and the members of the City Council to explain why I have serious concern about the program.

I hold the mayor in very high regard, have worked on his campaigns and will again. I know many on the City Council, regard them as friends and believe the city is fortunate to have such leaders.

In this case, though, I come at things from a different perspective, that of a businessman rather than a politician. As a businessman, a couple of things would guide my approach to an issue like this:

- Change management 101 – Sell the need before you sell the solution. We need our leaders to educate and illuminate us about the problem before we as voters can evaluate a solution.

A constant (inflation adjusted) dollar comparison shows that because inflation has been greater than 2.5 percent in 22 of the 33 years since Proposition 2½ went into effect, the Northampton tax levy has shrunk (I calculate a 13 percent shrinkage since 1982) and the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center says that inflation adjusted state Local Aid dollars have shrunk by 44 percent in the past 15 years.

These are huge changes that have shrunk the city budget by many millions of dollars. State data shows that Northampton now spends less in constant dollars on the average school kid than we did 30 years ago.

We all would say, “I don’t want to be taxed,” but few of us would say, “I don’t want my kids to have what I had.”

Understanding the problem is necessary for voters to be equipped to support policy change to address the problem. Massachusetts was once one of the highest-taxed states; now it is below the national average. Perhaps our progressive state should change its regressively flat income tax and tax the highest incomes at a higher rate?

We need our local leaders to educate us about the local effects of state policies so we can appropriately advocate with our state representatives.

The premise of a PILOT is that nonprofits are not already making a full good-citizen contribution and should pay more. Starting with this premise does not educate people as to the source of the problem and risks scapegoating valuable community contributors. (As with the gentleman at the mayor’s meeting who was angry that Smith College can renovate its library while our schools have inadequate funding).

The next time an override is needed, you may be able to say you’ve already squeezed the nonprofits, but public understanding will be no further along. We need our leaders to educate and illuminate about the nature of the problem.

- Influence without authority 101 – Seek first to understand, then to be understood. When you’re trying to get those over whom you don’t have direct authority to join in an effort, it is desirable to start by defining that effort as a shared, common focus.

This requires first listening to how those others think about the situation and using that as the basis to find common ground.

Rolling out a fully formed PILOT that names names and specifies amounts may seem like a laudable demonstration of doing one’s homework, but it certainly isn’t the beginning of a conversation.

It is not seeking first to understand and using that as the basis of being understood. The people you want as partners can only acquiesce or they can argue; you’re not building a partnership.

- Think about the world you want to create. In the late 1960s I once listened to author and professor Howard Zinn say that in our own behavior, we can demonstrate the world as we wish it to be.

I believe — and want to believe — that if you engaged nonprofits in discussions about the situation the city is in and asked them to join you in an exploration of what contributions they as good corporate citizens might make to help in addition to the contributions they have made historically, you would be modeling a world in which we assume each other to be people of good will and responsibility, and you would cultivate partners with valuable ideas about how to help.

In "A World Split Apart," Alexander Solzhenitsyn says, "Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relationships, this creates an atmosphere of spiritual mediocrity that paralyses men's noblest impulses."

Before instituting a PILOT, it is better to explain the problem, illuminate avenues of possible solution and, as regards non-profits, convene discussions that assume that, at least here in Northampton, a city with a good soul, our noblest impulses will serve us well.

Kevin Lake lives in Northampton.

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