

Sunday Column – Grassroots
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After five years of writing this weekly column it is rare that I have trouble coming up with a topic. Some weeks a theme emerges that is absolutely compelling. This week is a case in point.

At church last Sunday I picked up an information sheet about an organization called the Lee County Spirit of Democracy. Their stated mission is to “Restore the Spirit of Democracy by providing a forum, resources, programs and actions that lead to the reestablishment of the core values of democracy and the role of the Office of Citizen.” How can you not love that?

I turned eighteen just in time to participate in the presidential election held on November 7, 1972. Richard Nixon won a second term as president of the United States. I think everyone remembers how that turned out. My “citizen” experience since then has been a mixed bag with a few shining moments.

What is harder to take than not getting my person into office, is the overwhelming negativity coming from all sides. I don’t know how any politician gets anything done, given the time and energy he or she has to expend responding to a barrage of attacks.

At PAWS Humane we’re making friends with our state and local politicians. As responsible citizens we should have good working relationships with these folks. We know their job description includes representing all the people in their districts, not just PAWS Humane. What this means is that we sometimes have to put on our big girl and boy pants when they don’t go our way.

What we really want is to simply have a voice in the public policy decisions that will impact animals. We happen to be experts on this subject matter and want our politicians to know that we are available to discuss our positions and why we hold them. We have ready access to a vast national resource of information and will do the research when we don’t have a ready answer.

So here’s the deal we make with our friends in the council chambers and the state house: we promise not to badmouth them when they don’t follow our ideology. If it isn’t safe to ask our opinion then they won’t. They will be forced to do the best they can on their own. Politicians can’t be experts on everything. They need all of us to provide our input without demanding they do what we think is right or punishing them through social media when they don’t.

November 7 Dave and I attended the annual Mayor’s Prayer Breakfast in Opelika. Mayor Gary Fuller urged citizens to do their best to make a small difference every day. This theme was echoed by the Rev. Robin Wilson in her message to those assembled.

The Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley coordinated a grassroots event called, “On the Table” which was held all day on November 7. It involved bringing small groups of citizens together to share a meal and to talk about our community. The goal was to get all participants’ ideas “on the table” about what is going well and what could be better. The ultimate goal was to share ideas about what we can do to make our community better.

Some 6,500 individuals participated in more than 500 separate groups. One of these groups, hosted by PAWS Humane, included board and staff, city council members, a local veterinarian, and our animal control manager. The discussion was thoughtful and free-flowing. We left the meeting with a short list

of very doable action items that, over the course of the next year, have the potential to make a big difference in our community.

We are responsible for our communities but we don't have to move mountains to effect change for the better. It is the small actions that, over time, make our communities great.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.