

What is government?

The answer can be as long and complicated as the writer wishes to make it. Of course there are many varieties of government but the one established with adoption of the United States Constitution is generally described as a Democratic Republic or more commonly referred to as a Democracy. The people elect individuals to represent them in the making of laws and policies. They expect those elected to be responsive to the will of the people while also protecting the rights of the minority. With amendments and despite a civil war the United States Constitution has survived for more than 200 years and, as has been said by many, "it's not perfect but it's better than anything else out there."

Another saying among political pundits is that all politics is local. In Newton County, elsewhere in Georgia and the nation elections are routinely held every two years. Elections are the peoples' opportunity to send potent messages to those in public office. That's when evaluations are made and rewards are given and punishment administered.

Leaders are elected to get things done without favor in a timely manner and at a reasonable cost. And leaders are expected to conduct the public's business in public view. When it appears that governing is being done by a small group behind closed doors the citizens become restless and start demanding explanations. The problem is compounded when explanations appear to be fabricated or partial answers are given in what looks like an attempt to hide unsavory conduct. There is a better way and it begins with a clear understanding and acceptance that government is the public's business and it must be transparent. Exceptions should be true exceptions with a complete explanation of why it was necessary to close the meeting to the public.

Georgia's Attorney General has published guidelines for elected officials to follow and his office enforces the law on open meetings and open records. The rules may not always be convenient but they are not difficult to understand and with a minimum of effort elected officials can carry out their duties and comply with the law. Actions that appear to be taken in an effort to avoid compliance are viewed with skepticism and seen

as another example of “good ole boy politics.” Such actions do nothing to earn the public’s trust, a necessary ingredient for good government.

Once lost, regaining public trust is a difficult task. It takes time and consistent exemplary behavior demonstrating that trust is warranted. Governing is made more difficult as every action is viewed with suspicion. Every misstep is seen as a deliberate attempt to get away with some inappropriate act. Difficult decisions are postponed out of fear. Fear of being ridiculed. Fear of losing the next election. It’s a terrible experience for all involved.

One of the advantages from living beyond the suggested three score seven is that you experience a lot and sometimes you learn a lot. Having worked for city, county, state and federal governments I have found a common characteristic in every instance where the people lose their respect for and begin to mistrust their elected leaders. In every case it begins with trying to do the people’s business behind closed doors.

Whether done out of fear or as part of a conspiracy to commit a wrongful act it ends with the same result. First the participants begin to mistrust each other. There’s finger pointing and denial and soon it becomes obvious to others. Then fear begins to dominate every decision. Important business lingers waiting for action. There are calls for investigations and resignations. No one knows who to believe. And finally the electors decide the only solution is to clean house. The good is thrown out with the bad. And everybody suffers the consequences. And sadly, none of it had to be.

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