

Sighs Matter

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – March 24, 2013

Sigh... It's a word to describe a sound we make. But, the meaning can only be discerned by listening closely to the sound.

We have the sigh of relief, which we also voice as "whew." It's not a triumphant noise, but a way of saying: "that could have been a lot worse."

We also have the sigh of resignation -- an extended, deflating exhale sounding much longer than the word itself. It's the sigh that says "this is only going to get worse."

Occasionally, when relief and resignation intersect as they did for me on Tuesday night, you utter both expressions at once. Out of town on business and pulling a late night stint in the office, I still found time to monitor websites for news about the ESPLOST referendum back home in Newton County.

When final results were posted, I sighed with relief upon seeing the measure had passed. But, I followed quickly with an involuntary long sigh of resignation, seeing the incredibly low voter turnout. In a county of more than 59,000 registered voters, only 1,956 cast a ballot. Official results will say the ESPLOST passed 57% to 43%, but the truth is that 1.9% said "yes" to the continuation of the 1% sales tax for educations, 1.4% said "no," and 96.7% said "I don't give a damn."

As a supporter of the ESPLOST (see my March 10 column), I was relieved the measure passed. But, the turnout figures were stunning, even with the lowered expectations we've come to hold in these times.

Whose fault is that? I won't say the Board of Education intentionally sought lower voter turnout by putting the referendum in a special rather than general election, because I haven't asked any board member to comment. But, prevailing wisdom and strategy for years has been for governing bodies to keep these types of referenda out of the spotlight of a general election.

The state used that tactic for last summer's Transportation SPLOST vote, putting it on the July 31 primary ballot instead of the November general election. And, conventional wisdom be damned, the measure went down in flames. Supporters were also left scrambling in the weeks leading up to the vote once they realized laying low and talking as little as possible about the referendum was not working in their favor.

Conventional wisdom just isn't what it used to be. But, then again, what in the world is what it used to be? And, was it ever really wise to govern by flying below the radar?

As Strother Martin said to Paul Newman in Cool Hand Luke, “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.”

I’m not singling out the Board of Education, and I’m not excusing the voting public for their apathy. The communication breakdown is on both sides – elected officials and the general public. Between them, we have all the signs of a relationship gone sour and growing toxic.

We’ve all lived it – personally with friends and family and professionally with coworkers, customers, and business partners. Somewhere along the way, you lose trust, you stop talking about it, and it only gets worse from there. At every level, too many people don’t trust the government, and the government clearly no longer trusts the people.

In times long past there was a prevailing view “government of the people, by the people, for the people” was a cause worth dying for. But, between Lincoln’s time and ours, government became a necessary evil in the eyes of many. Sadly, the prevailing message today seems to paint government as both evil and unnecessary.

I’m an anachronism – a relic of another time, perhaps. But, I’m still a hopeful soul who believes many good people put themselves forth for elected office to do what’s necessary and right in the service of others. Maybe it’s because I was married to an elected official, I’ve been friends with many at the local level, and I’ve met a number serving at the state and national level. But, I can honestly say I’ve been impressed more often than not. And, no matter how much I may disagree with the actions of some elected to represent me, I never stop appreciating their willingness to do a tough and thankless job most people are simply no longer willing to consider.

But, nothing good can come from public policy executed with the solid support of less than two percent of the citizenry and blatant disregard by 97%. Don’t make excuses, people, get involved. Or else...

Sigh...