

Hometown Oneonta Column
September 2023

What Are All These People Up To?

I like to call it “Grassroots Governance.”

It’s not a commonly used phrase, but its pursuit has informed the first 20 months of my term, so there’s value in clarifying its meaning – or at least my view of it.

There are several interpretations of the term and its application - some of which I subscribe to - but as a practical matter, I would describe it this way:

For the fastest way to get to the best, most cost effective, informed, and supportable determination of strategies to address the city of Oneonta’s problems and promise, we need a new paradigm of community participation.

In this model, self-identifying members of the community with opinions, experience, expertise, and a commitment to respectful dialogue are brought together with a clear and focused charge.

If they haven’t previously been participants in local government, so much the better.

They are supported by and connective to city government, but they are independent thinkers whose mission is to determine proposals to be taken to boards, commissions and ultimately, the Common Council for action.

Bringing many people to the table has obvious benefit.

But... Avoiding the cacophony of too many topics, simultaneous discussions, and potential rabbit holes must be a central strategy.

Agendas have to drive the discussion, and every meeting should create identifiable movement and progress, leaving its participants energized and eager to continue.

So, creating smaller groups with laser focus on specific goals is the key.

My strategy as Mayor has been to create opportunities for a significant number and cross-section of our community to become engines for change.

To do that, I have listened. I have listened to you. I continue to listen to you.

When you've expressed an opinion or shared a concern, I've fit that piece into the larger picture. I've examined it and tried to determine how it might be connective to another priority.

Then, I've created "ad hoc" committees, workgroups, or taskforces.

I've asked you to join - for a heartbeat or for the long-haul, and that those groups continue to seek new blood and new ideas.

The general perception is that cities (Oneonta included) have an outsized tendency to hire "experts" to do studies – (often considered an expensive way to kick the can down the road.)

There is no denying that studies are generally useful to the municipalities that have them conducted. However, with rare exception, they do not engage the community in their production, except as generators of opinion or as demographics.

And that means that – again, generally speaking – results may be viewed with skepticism by the public, sometimes complicating their implementation.

By engaging our neighbors in the formulation of strategies, based on fact-based foundations, and determined through the concerted efforts of small groups we "bake into the cake" a support network within the community for action by its government.

It's what I call grassroots governance.

Seemingly, I have become infamous for the creation ad hoc committees, workgroups, and taskforces. Good. I'm proud of that.

That they are populated by so many of our neighbors means... it's working.