48th KZGN News Talking Points Editorial

Should elected officials be forced to participate in internet social media sites?

But first, a comment received about the last editorial: Are decisions made at council meetings based on politics, solid engineering data, or maybe both?

Harry wrote the following, “If what you say is true, then the system is flawed. To only allow those who step into the docket control the debate is injustice at its worst. Those in leadership positions need to listen to and consider all forms of input into a discussion before making a decision. If there are county commissioners who are serving and

Avoid social media, shame on them; they are not doing their job. If they need to ask questions, the docket is not the only place they should be asking them.”

Well Harry, you made a lot of comments. Once again, the main point of the editorial was that the best way a citizen can influence an elected body’s decision is by appearing in person. I didn’t say that people that appeared in person was the ones that controlled the discussion. I want to again say, this isn’t the only way to influence the decision, but appearing in person is the most powerful way. Elected people do consider all comments received. Whether, written, telephone, or even meeting at Albertsons and talking about an issue. However, those methods often only reach one of the five members making the decision. This leaves the others with other information to base their decision on. When you appear in person and provide comments, all of the board hears them. They all have the opportunity to discuss your comments with you. As far as the use of the internet, social media, etc. Some elected officials do not use them. You say they should. Maybe you’re right. But there is nothing that requires an elected official to consider anything that isn’t presented within the regular official meeting held to discuss the topic. I have been told by many elected officials that they never look at blogs or Facebook for information. While I have participated in social media, I know there are some elected officials that don’t.

While most of us are comfortable with the Internet and all its communication capabilities, there are still some that are not comfortable. I know one elected official that never uses email. His wife does it for him. I had one elected official once tell me that as long as those blogs allow anonymous comments, he would not participate. He may be more than willing to hold a respectful discussion with anyone where he knew who the person is. But he would not subject himself to the abusive tactics some people use because they can’t be held accountable for their comments. Just look at our local blogs. How often do you see any comment from any of our elected officials? Not very often. Some never make comment. Now you might not like it, but that’s the way it is. To sit and believe you are influencing a decision by making comments on a blog, you are naive. The law only requires the elected officials to consider properly submitted information in the decision process. In conclusion, again, my main point is that to influence the decision process, the most powerful way to do so is by personally appearing at the meeting and providing your comments. It’s not the only way, but the most powerful.

Now on to today’s editorial:

Should elected officials be forced to participate in internet social media sites?

This kind of ties back to my previous reply to harry about how people can best influence decisions by elected officials. Part of Harry’s comment was as follows: If there are county commissioners who are serving and avoid social media, shame on them, they are not doing their job. If they need to ask questions, the docket is not the only place they should be asking them.

So, what do you think? First, we can replace his words “county commissioners” with any “elected official”. Do you think it’s shameful for an elected official to not participate in internet social media? I can tell you from experience that I know many elected officials avoid internet social media sites like the plague. I have always participated in them. I view them as a good source for providing information to the public. This is because I believe a lot of the time that the public doesn’t have all the information they need to determine whether an elected official is making good decisions.

Social media sites provide another means to get information out, and receive public input. If you feel an elected official should be available via these sites, then you need to make your opinion known. Ask the candidates during election forums whether they will make themselves available via internet sites. If they say no, then let them know that is not acceptable to you. As one that knows quite a few elected officials, I know they would participate if they knew who they were discussing an issue with. The anonymous comment capability is troublesome to many elected officials. There are times elected officials take a lot of verbal abuse. But they know that going in. If they run for office, then they accept the fact that people may make unfavorable comments directed at them. Some believe to participate in an anonymous internet site goes above and beyond. Most people that participate in these sites are respectful and just want to discuss an issue. Then there a few that see these sites as a way to attack a person. Some people like to throw unsubstantiated personal attack bombs against an elected official. While the elected official has to take it, these comments many times hurt their families. Like former Mayor Clark pleaded with people, “it’s ok to be tough on the issues, but not on the person.”

A good strong debate can be accomplished, without personal attacks. Most elected officials see these internet sites as a means for personal attacks. Many people would say something from a computer keyboard, they would never say to a person’s face. Another thing I know some elected officials find offensive is the use of profanity by writers. Some of these social media sites have no restriction on profanity. The elected official will not participate. There is nothing requiring them to read things with language they find offensive. But when you get replies from say Senator Boxer’s office email, do you think she is the one responding to you? I would bet almost 99% certain it’s some office staffer responding to you. This staffer screens all the email and social media for their boss. Seldom do these high level elected officials actually read these things. They read only what a staffer forwards to them. When you get to our local level, we don’t have staffers screening the abusive stuff. Local elected officials take it themselves. Please understand, I’m not saying that the system is broke. It is the way it is. However, elected officials are not required to use social media. Remember, discussions of topics can be accomplished with respect, without profanity or personal attack. The discussion can even be very heated and emotional. Respect and decorum is necessary for civil discussions.

In conclusion, yes, I do believe that elected officials should participate in internet social media. It is a good communication tool. But they are not required to do so.

I’m Tom Wiknich, and that’s what I think. I’d like to know what you think. If you have any comments about this editorial, or would like to discuss or recommend a topic, I’d like to hear from you. Please email them to info@kzgn.net.