

Another approach to sales tax: It's time state government listens to "voice of the people"

By Glen Browder
Special to The Star

On the Web: http://www.annistonstar.com/view/full_story/6413764/article-It%E2%80%99s-time-state-government-listens-to-%E2%80%98voice-of-the-people%E2%80%99?

FEB. 21, 2010 -- Vox populi is a fancy Latin term that means "voice of the people" and stresses the importance of listening to everyday citizens in public affairs. Coincidentally, it also is the motto of the Alabama House of Representatives.

Unfortunately, public officials often have invoked fuzzy versions of the "voice of the people" to justify questionable causes and foist empty solutions upon their constituents. Maybe these politicians are just confused by the onslaught of ideas from loud activists and powerful special interests, all claiming to speak for the people.

It's also unfortunate that many citizens have opted out of civic dialogue and defaulted as responsible participants in the democratic process. Perhaps they're just disgusted with endless attack ads, robo-calls and sales pitches disguised as public-opinion surveys.

All of which leads me to suggest that letting Alabamians have a legitimate, periodic, scientifically measured voice in political decisions might enhance democracy in a state that surely needs a civic boost.

A simple proposal

I propose that Alabama's state government considers instituting an annual survey of citizen attitudes toward important governmental functions for which these citizens pay good money and have reasonable expectations of quality service.

I'm not talking about stirring up divisive, contentious issues like race, abortion and taxes. I envision simple questions about general public satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the state's performance in areas such as education, transportation, health care and public safety.

Actually, my proposal is a variation of a governance discussion at a meeting of the Center for a Better South last fall. I'm a member of this group that seeks to inspire Southern leaders to move the region forward, and we spent a full weekend talking about a broad agenda of measurable objectives.

I was particularly interested in the following plank of the group's conclusions: "Each Southern state should develop and implement a benchmark citizen trust survey by 2011. By 2015, each state's levels of trust in state government should increase by 20 percent over the benchmark." I think asking the public for guidance would be a definite step forward in enhancing citizen trust.

How might this work?

I've talked with numerous sources — public-opinion experts, administrative professionals and even politicians — the past few weeks about this idea. Their response has been universally positive and enthusiastic.

Actually, structured public input of this sort is fairly common at the local level. The city of Auburn, for example, has used public opinion

as part of its policy-making and budgetary decisions since the 1980s. Folks there tell me it works very well.

Alabama could do the same thing at the state level. We have a solid corps of scholars experienced in measuring public opinion, and several universities have performed such research for various agencies over the past few decades. Estimates of cost are all reasonable, ranging from \$10,000 to \$20,000 for an annual survey that meets acceptable standards of scientific analysis. The real question is not whether this endeavor is feasible, but whether politicians will buy into the idea.

Public officials quite often are reluctant to take this step in modern governance, fearing that the survey will be faulty and will be used against them politically. In truth, furthermore, the environment of state politics is more combative than at the local level. The governor and/or the state Legislature would have to commit to a new way of doing the people's business. They would have to craft a reputable, independent, broad-based authority to oversee the integrity of the survey. They would have to incorporate the findings into their policies and budgets. And they would need to sustain this project over several years to monitor their progress as representatives and decide whether the new system is worthwhile for the long run.

Thus, this proposal requires bold and determined leadership in Montgomery and reasoned thinking among citizens throughout the state. But the fact is that surveys are standard practice in some governmental settings, many media organizations and most commercial marketing operations. They don't cost much money. And they work.

A timely question for this year's elections

The essential question posed here is straightforward: "Should the voice of the

people have a more official and significant role — through scientific citizen surveys — in modern Alabama government?"

I believe the 2010 election is a perfect time for Alabamians to debate the issue among themselves, and I encourage voters to probe wannabe officials about this proposal at various campaign forums over the next few months. Institutionalizing public opinion in state policy deliberations may sound like a radical new idea, but such surveys have to be an improvement over rule by activists and lobbyists.

Perhaps the time is right for "vox populi" to become more than a fancy term engraved on a legislative seal hanging on a wall in the statehouse. Officializing the voice of the people would give our elected officials better guidance for their decisions and our citizens might feel better about their contribution to the process. And we all might be better off as a democratic society.