

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Village of Ellenville Trustee

Suggestion Box? Go Stuff It!

A Professor: The trustees have a few suggestions they would like to submit to you.

Professor Wagstaff (Groucho Marx): I think you know what the trustees can do with their suggestions. — (Horse Feathers, 1932)

Oh, did I mention that suggestions for change are not always welcome? Whether it's inertia (being too lazy, complacent, or ingrained to want change)... or having one's turf stepped on... or even reasonable concerns about costs... there's a natural tendency for new ideas to be reflexively and defensively resisted by many. After all, if it's such a great idea, why hasn't it already been implemented? (A Catch-22 conundrum that begs the question, of course.)

Is there significant vested interest in things staying as they are? Is habit or complacency likely to be an obstacle? A wise reformer knows when to put forth a call for change... and when to bide one's time.

I learned my lesson soon after I was on the Village Board. Even before the election, I pointed out that the minutes and other materials were printed on only one side of a sheet of paper. Wasn't this a waste of paper (and, hence, taxpayer money), since any computer printer or copier could print on *both* sides of a sheet? The Village Manager reacted surprised and embarrassed, as if this obvious fact had never been considered before.

So, after the election, I proposed my first official resolution, the "Paper and Document Reduction Initiative." In excruciating detail I set forth a program to "promote more efficient production and distribution of Documents, in order to save money, reduce waste, protect the environment, eliminate redundancy, and save filing and storage space."

Based on my observations, it called for: reducing the number of items even generated (not everyone needs to read all material, or needs a printed copy); making sure multiple copies weren't generated, with *one* person in charge of what is to be reproduced and distributed (I've received three copies of the same document -- from the Clerk, the VM, and the Police Chief!); not reprinting entire documents when only a few minor revisions are made, and dating the changes to avoid confusion regarding earlier drafts; not distributing complete documents when only a summary is needed, with notice that the full item can be made available if needed, preferably in electronic form; eliminating unnecessary cover/title pages; using smaller type, thinner margins, multi-columns, tighter spacing, etc., to fit more words on each page; using email and electronic means to eliminate much paper altogether; and, of course, printing on two sides

(wherever possible and allowed by law), without putting two non-related items on the same sheet (or else how to file a single sheet that has a police item on the front and an unrelated water item on the back?). All this was spelled out in fine print, setting guidelines and explaining them, establishing who was responsible for what, and covering all contingencies.

Logical, comprehensive, clear (I would have called the whole package a "no-brainer," except that I despise that term), I expected it to be universally hailed, with me hoisted on shoulders for solving so many problems with one stroke.

Well, little did I know!

Without specific evidence, the Manager claimed that compliance would require too much extra work, and we'd have to hire another office person just to make it so! (Funny, but it takes me no real extra time to flip paper in my laser printer or copier, or use the backside of scrap paper for drafts). The Clerk, though, found the time to contact a dozen other municipalities to find enough that didn't print on both sides. (My response was I really didn't care about the ones that didn't, only those that did; if the idea was inherently sound, that's all that mattered.) As various other brickbats were hurled at me (I was even chastised for detailing a simple resolution in the legalese format of a Local Law!), I tried to defend my cause, while the Board just sat in silence until it was over. It never came to a vote, and sits in my proposal folder to this day. (Maybe I asked for too much at once?)

The aftermath: most weeks I still got trustee packages all (or mostly) one-sided, rating 0-10% on my Krulick Paper Reduction Index; other weeks, nearly *everything* came two-sided, even where the front and back have no connection, making it hard to file (maybe 60-70% on the KPRI); some few weeks it was nearly as requested, even without my resolution being passed, garnering 90% KPRI or above.

What this tells me, though, is that the Village machinery CAN do just as I suggested but, maybe, doesn't want to feel obligated to do so! Further, to outdo even my suggestions (whether to be ironic or placating, I don't know), I, alone, have lately received packages where *four* pages are digitally shrunk to fit on *one* side of a sheet, so that *eight* pages now fit on *one* two-sided piece of paper! Yes, it's really tiny print, and it's impossible to file, but it *does* save *some* paper, so I guess I shouldn't complain... too much!

"First they ignore you; then they ridicule you; then they fight you; then you win." — (Mohandas K. Gandhi)
To be continued.

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