

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

“Talking” and “leadership”

The third PottsTOWN Talks will be held 7 p.m. next Tuesday at Connections on High to discuss education.

PottsTOWN Talks was conceived and organized by 19-year-old Pottstown School Board member Emanuel Wilkerson, who won office in a write-in campaign last year while he was still a high school senior.

About 100 people attended each of his first two forums to discuss the challenges Pottstown faces and to suggest solutions.

“We have social divisions, our tax base is struggling, we need economic development, we can only move forward together...” Wilkerson said.

As a fellow school board member, I look with wonderment at Emanuel, who is one of the most charming and energetic people I know. He reminds me of Henry Adams’s description of Theodore Roosevelt — “he was ‘pure act.’”

But successful leaders — and Emanuel is well on his way to becoming one — must persuade people to do things they don’t want to do.

Tough choices

As Heifitz and Linsky write in *Leadership on the Line*, “People rarely elect or hire anyone to disturb their jobs or their lives. People expect politicians and managers to use their authority to provide them with the right answers, not to confront them with disturbing questions and difficult choices.”

At a previous PottsTOWN Talks meeting, both economic development director Steve Bamford and Pottstown Realtor Matt Green identified high taxes as the No. 1 impediment to economic development in Pottstown.

Painless solutions

So how does the school community avoid tax increases? The pain-

less solution, and the one I hear most often, is lobbying the state for more aid. State aid to Pottstown has increased 46 percent over the last ten years — about triple the rate of inflation — but the school community feels more money is necessary.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Another painless solution was approved this summer by the school board and Pottstown Council — the Local Economic Development Revitalization Tax Act (LERTA).

This provides a temporary tax break to property owners if they improve the value of their properties. (Of course, the tax breaks are subsidized by existing property owners.)

Adaptive change resisted

I’ve suggested the school district must cut costs by decreasing our staff, sending fewer students to special schools, and cutting back on excessive transportation spending.

Needless to say, these ideas are not popular with the school community.

As Heifitz and Linsky write,

“Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people’s habits, beliefs and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures. ... No wonder people resist.”

If local government was a business, change would have to happen to avoid bankruptcy. But government leaders always have the choice to raise taxes, which avoids tough decisions but slowly drains the life out of the community.

As Wilkerson conducts his meeting next week, I hope participants will not shy away from hard questions that will lead to real progress.

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board’s.



EMANUEL WILKERSON at a previous community forum called PottsTOWN Talks.