



County of Hamilton

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CANDIDATE GUEST COLUMN

By Dusty Rhodes, Hamilton County Auditor

As a taxpayer and voter, what do I want from my elected officials?

The answer is "common sense". That doesn't seem too much to ask. Too often we are disappointed by those we elect. In contrast, I have tried to live up to the trust Hamilton County voters have repeatedly placed in me.

Immediately on taking office I stopped the long-standing practice of deducting political contributions from employee pay checks. Most other county offices followed my lead about a year later.

After that, my first task was to restore confidence in property valuations. I did that by removing political considerations from setting values, by setting training and certification goals for our appraisal staff and by holding neighborhood conferences across the county during the six-year reappraisals so property owners could review their tentative new values.

Then I established our Finance Department as an honest, independent check and balance on every county department for which we make payments. By writing the county's checks we can spot questionable vouchers. And we did. In one instance our refusal to pay for a reported 650 mile round trip to Cleveland (which is about 250 miles from here) brought significant, lasting changes in county travel policies.

Ours was one of the first metropolitan areas in the country to have a property search website. By making public records available we have reduced the opportunity for corruption and saved countless trips to our office by professionals who need and use our information every day. The website allows us to communicate with citizens and even provides estimates of individual costs of proposed tax levies. Our IT Department is one of the best in the region, constantly updating our service and often called to assist other county offices.

But most important to me in keeping faith with the voters was my promise to operate the Auditor's office in a professional, business-like way. I did that by reducing our staff from 174 employees when I took office to 79 today. This was accomplished through attrition and cross-training over the years. By planning ahead we were able to avoid cutbacks and layoffs when the economy tanked in 2008.

My commitment to respecting taxpayer's money made me the first Hamilton County Auditor to return unspent funds to local communities, school districts and taxing entities. The Real Estate Appraisal Fund

comes from a small portion of every tax levy. I could have legally spent every penny. I didn't. Two years ago I returned over \$16 million, a record amount.

Finally, I have established a culture of citizen service in the Auditor's office. One observer recently said we were "the gold standard of transparency among local government offices". The best way to explain it is that I believe no one "works for me" in our office. We all work together for you. I have been honored by your support over the years and ask for your vote again this year. I look forward to the challenges ahead and to meeting them with "common sense".

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