

GOVERNMENTAL ECONOMY BEGINS AT HOME

by Ruel McDaniel

GOVERNMENTAL economy and tax-savings, like charity, should—and can—begin at home. The indifference of the average citizen toward the actions of his city government is appalling and a little frightening. Indifference is an open invitation to political skulduggery, and sooner or later citizens elect a slate of city officials who eagerly accept that invitation.

As a political novice, I was disappointed and frightened when I realized, gradually, that the average citizen thinks of his city government and what it is doing only in terms of clogged sewers or a hole in the street in front of his home.

Soon after I was elected mayor of Port Lavaca, Texas, a community of 12,500 population, we held our annual budget hearing. It was well-publicized in the two local weekly papers and, according to law, the city published legal notices of the

hearing in both papers. Prior to the date of the hearing, the city council, operating under a city manager form of government, had announced that it would be necessary to raise taxes in order to meet the needs of the rapidly-expanding community. There followed an audible undercurrent of grumbling: "Why do they need more money? They're doing practically nothing with what they have . . ."

During most of the day preceding the evening budget hearing, I fretted over the proposed budget and just how to explain the various budgetary items so that citizens would understand the necessity of the budget and the tax increase to provide money for it.

I went to the city hall in the afternoon, to make certain there would be ample seating facilities for the citizens. When I saw that there were only 12 chairs arranged for visitors, I berated Old Pedro, a fixture around the city hall who bore with pride the title of custodian.

Pedro smiled tolerantly as he shrugged his shoulders. "If Senor Mayor wishes . . ." And he trudged off to the storage room and brought a few more folding chairs. "But there will not be a need for these we already have."

The budget hearing was advertised to start at 7:30 P.M. We waited until almost eight o'clock before finally opening the meeting to an empty room. Not a single citizen appeared to hear us discuss the budget or to offer criticism or suggestions. Not even Pedro was there to grin tolerantly at me.

We had budgeted more than a quarter-million dollars of local citizens' money, and not one person was interested enough in what we proposed to do with his taxes and utility fees to sit in on our discussion of the various items which made up the budget.

WHILE the average citizen sits back and looks longingly to Washington for some minor tax cut, he ignores completely the greater opportunity for tax savings at home. A reduction of 25 cents on the \$100 valuation in property taxes would mean materially more to the average citizen who owns his home than a ten percent reduction in income taxes, and yet he would grasp jubilantly at the suggestion to reduce income taxes, while passing up the opportunity to use his influence to lower city taxes.

Our city council is made up of

run-of-the-mill business and professional men, at least moderately successful in their own fields but no more qualified than several hundred other men and women to run the government of our community. We of the council need the help and suggestions—even the constructive criticism—of others.

If we received this help, we could operate the city more intelligently and more economically. Our governing body is composed of six councilmen, the mayor and the city manager; eight ordinary citizens trying to perform a satisfactory job of municipal management. Assume that there are 500 more citizens in our town who are equally as well qualified for the offices we hold as we are ourselves. (There probably are more.) Assume, then, that these 500 citizens would give us the benefit of their thoughts, instead of idly criticizing their city government in broad and vague terms, and imagine the benefit that could come to our city if they did so and of the economies we could effect, acting upon the practical recommendations that would be sifted from the many originating from these business and professional men.

I write of conditions in the comparatively small cities of America, cities not under the heel of political bosses and corrupt "ward heelers". In most small cities, government is comparatively free of graft and personal favoritism, and the citizen

fortunate enough to live in such a community is shortsighted when he fails to take such an active interest in his city government so it will remain free of corruption.

Lack of interest in local government breeds corruption—a parasite that saps the financial strength of the community and wastes more money than an income tax cut would save the average citizen.

SOON after our well-advertised budget hearing, an elderly woman stalked into council meeting, one evening, at the moment a spokesman for a delegation from a new residential subdivision was standing and explaining the reason for the delegation's visit. The woman strode vehemently up to the head of the table, flung down a delinquent tax notice in front of me and in a voice that belied her aura of dignity, boomed, "Who's responsible for sending me this!"

The spokesman for the delegation stammered and stopped talking; newspaper reporters grinned, and councilmen sat in stunned silence. Recovering from the effect of the sudden interruption, I tried to explain to the woman that if she would be seated we would hear her complaint as soon as we finished hearing from the delegation. But she would have none of that.

"You sent me a bill for delinquent taxes. I'll have you know I was never delinquent in my life!"

"Well, if you'll just be seated—"

"I didn't come here to sit. I want that notice destroyed and my tax record cleared!"

I tried humoring her. I told her that if she would come next day and talk with the tax collector-assessor, I was sure that everything could be cleared up. She would have none of that either.

"I'd like to know," she looked at me accusingly, "just what you're doing with my tax money!"

When I reminded her of the budget hearing, only a few weeks previously, she ignored the reminder, glared at all of us momentarily and flounced toward the exit. Before she reached the door, she stopped, turned and haughtily exclaimed, "And you owe me an apology!"

A little preposterous? Perhaps, but this woman was the widow of a prominent pioneer, she owned considerable property in town and, to the average citizen, she was a cultured, level-headed woman of considerable poise and refinement. She had no interest in the quarter-million we had earmarked for the current year, but she demanded to know who was squandering the \$8.72 she insisted that she had paid but which did not show on our tax records.

For more than two years our city has been involved in a legal controversy with a paving contractor over a \$700,000 paving program he executed for the city. The legalities of the controversy are such that the

city can do no more paving, and practically no major utility development, until this suit is settled.

By the amount of news and editorial comment on the situation the past two years, one would assume that every citizen would know the basic details of the controversy and know that the city's street, water and sewer extensions are of necessity curtailed until this suit is settled. And yet during the year that I have served as mayor, seldom have we had a regular council meeting that some delegation has not appeared before us, demanding drainage, paving or water and sewer extension.

THE OPERATION of the federal government, or even the average state government, is considerably complicated, but city government, particularly in a community the size of ours, is simple. Any man who can operate successfully a peanut stand can understand, after a few moments study, where his tax money goes, what he gets for it and why he gets as little improvements and services as he does.

And understanding, he is in position to offer his suggestions, based on specialized knowledge he has gained from his own occupation, that could materially help the city council in giving him more for his tax and utility dollar.

A suggestion from a banker, for example, might enable us to save

money in financing equipment purchases; a restaurant man doubtless could offer a suggestion that might save some money in feeding city prisoners. A physician possibly could, in ten minutes, offer a suggestion that could save hundreds of dollars a year on our mosquito control program; and a barber might be able to show us where we could snip off some expense in our license and inspection routine.

Instead, these citizens complain about taxes and show no interest in the operation of their city government until they join a delegation and visit the council to demand better draining or a street extension or to complain about an occasional spurt of muddy water from their taps.

I know that if we had the combined suggestions of all the qualified citizens of our town, we could remove at least 25 cents from the tax valuation of real and personal property and at the same time render better service than we do now. We are only eight ordinary citizens, doing the best we can. We believe we are typical of the governing body of the average community of 2,500 to 50,000.

If, by some magic, citizens all over the nation would turn their periodic complaints into constructive suggestions, billions of dollars could be saved in municipal spending, without curtailing any needed service.

The Key to Russian Gains

by Kenneth Wray Conners

WHAT explains the gradual emergence of Russia as a world power? How does it happen that this nation of peasants has the audacity to challenge our leadership? What has enabled the Russian people to excel, temporarily, in certain arts and sciences which may threaten our very existence?

These questions have unleashed from the press, from radio and television, from legislative halls, and from the lecture platform a flood of replies, most of them indignant, many of them shrill, and some downright hysterical.

"The Russians pour all their energies into military science, and starve their people to do it!" "They captured the best German scientists and the fruits of their experimentation." "They're ruthless; the specter of Siberia drives every scientific and industrial worker to almost superhuman effort." "They have a

master plan, with all activity coordinated to attain the goals set forth by that plan."

Now there is some truth, admittedly, in these and similar explanations; but I submit that the fundamental answer lies at your doorstep and mine, and it's one we can't evade. Or put it as a question rather than an answer: aren't the Russians displaying the qualities which enabled our forefathers to build a strong, vigorous nation while we, reaching a comfortable and smug maturity, have surrendered our stamina for flabbiness, our aggressiveness for complacency, our industriousness for indolence?

An advertising and public relations executive, Kenneth Wray Conners writes "in his spare time" on topics of sociological and psychological interest. He has published one book and has two others in manuscript.