

Civil Conversations: The Key for Change

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Jeff Smith writes about the origin of his mobile office hours known as “Stop & Talks.” It’s always been important to be accessible to the people you are elected to serve and he’s glad to be hosting more of Stop & Talks now that the weather is warming up!

BRUNSWICK, WI - It’s always been my top priority to be accessible to the people I was elected to serve. In my four years serving in the State Assembly in the 2000’s, I scheduled town hall listening sessions as often as I could. My office arranged listening sessions at town halls, libraries and other public spaces during times that were open in my schedule, which often meant during the work day.

Occasionally a constituent would come in and share his or her thoughts, but it was quiet for the most part. More often I would sit alone inside a building and out of sight; it made me wonder if there was a better way to connect with the people I was elected to serve. I brainstormed for a while and realized curbside listening sessions worked better for everyone on the move. (This was way before curbside became a thing during the pandemic).

I got to work on the plan. I still had my old Dodge pickup that I used for my small business. All I

needed was a sign for my neighbors to know that I was there, ready to listen. And that's just how my Stop & Talks got started.

The 2011 redistricting process radically changed the makeup of the district. Having lost the Assembly seat and faced with a nearly all-new gerrymandered district I had one more reason to rethink how I interacted with folks and made myself available to my community.

Over the years, I was still unable to break through the heavily gerrymandered district and be re-elected to the Assembly, but my Stop & Talks were well received and appreciated by all those who stopped by. My only regret when I first started this method of connecting with voters was that I hadn't had the opportunity to conduct these mobile office hours when I was an elected representative.

Now, as the elected State Senator representing the 31st Senate District covering all or most of Eau Claire, Dunn, Pepin, Pierce, Buffalo, Trempealeau and Jackson counties, it has been my pleasure to park my pickup at busy locations where constituents can easily find me, prop up my sign and have conversations with my constituents. In our northern climate, it's obviously a seasonal activity and the pandemic caused me to shut it down for too long but I'm excited to be back at it again.



I've been part of some incredible conversations over the years. It's a privilege to have people feel they can open up to me on the side of the road. There have been tears and hugs and occasionally some tough conversations.

What the "Stop and Talk" has taught me is that we're not naturally good listeners. I'm

constantly reminding myself to begin the conversation by listening and wait for the moment when the person talking might expect a response. Having these conversations, I think, really helps the new friends I make, as well as myself. Everyone who's stopped has contributed to my own personal growth and has made me a better public servant.

It's important for me to be approachable and that's why my Stop & Talks work. I think it's made some people, who might otherwise be uncomfortable in a more formal setting, willing to approach their state senator with their thoughts.

We are more alike than we appear to be—Wisconsinites want much of the same things. Economic and physical security, educational opportunity for our children, clean drinking water, affordable housing, living wages, accessible and affordable healthcare, and a life that allows time to enjoy what this beautiful state has to offer.

Once we actually have respectful conversations like I have on the side of the road, we can make progress toward understanding each other. This opens the door for the prospect that we can work together and preserve the freedoms that our great democratic republic was created to offer.

I hope to visit with you soon. Stop and talk.

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