

Arcadia Faces Realities of ‘Small Government’

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Senator Kathleen Vinehout of Alma writes about the reality facing many entities, including municipalities and counties, of small government. Deep budget cuts and shrinking resources make it difficult for state government to provide assistance to communities in need. Kathleen met with officials in Arcadia – one of those communities hit hard by flooding and by shrinking state government.

ARCADIA, WI - People were friendly but anxious. They’d come to a meeting with local leaders to learn about protecting Arcadia from flooding.

Arcadia is nestled in a beautiful valley. Water from the surrounding hills drains into the Trempealeau River that runs right through town. Next to the river is the sprawling international headquarters of Ashley Furniture.

Ashley’s spokesperson began the recent meeting by sharing jobs created and businesses supported: 4,700 jobs created in western Wisconsin. More than 670 local and regional businesses supported.

Local leaders nodded. Many in attendance owned companies that benefited from Ashley’s location.

The problem is how to pay for upgrades to dams, dikes and levees needed to protect the city from flooding when rains drained water from surrounding hills right into the center of town.

Everyone remembered summer storms of 2010 that flooded Arcadia. Company representatives made it clear if storms came again and the company had to be rebuilt it would be in another country. Not in Arcadia.

The company asked for \$13 to \$20 million to improve the levy along the river.

Congressman Ron Kind said pending legislation could help. The Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act - passed the Senate but was tied up in the House because Republican Congressional leaders did not want to spend the money.

An Army Corps of Engineers official explained Corps programs and limits. Times are tough. Funding cuts had eroded the Corps' building authority.

Local officials explained they did not have the resources to pay for the project. Upstream the Mayor of Independence explained he needed help too.

Digging out Bugle Lake in Independence would hold more water running off the hills. Better yet, put in erosion structures, grass waterways, buffer strips and other conservation efforts. Keep rain on farm fields where it could do some good.

But the Governor and Legislators who voted for the state budget cut back funds for farmer conservation efforts.

Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) officials did have money and were close to an agreement for another part of the project. But WEDC officials didn't want state efforts washed away with the next big rain.

What was unspoken in the room but on everyone's mind: elections have consequences. Folks

were running up against the new world of smaller government that many of them had promoted. The easy political talk about "cutting government" had turned into real cuts to real programs they wanted and needed.

It is a lesson we all need to take to heart. Let's be real and specific when we talk about budgets and taxes and spending. Be careful what you ask for. You may get it.

The reality of the budget is this: 85 percent of state spending goes to six priorities upon which most of us agree -- transportation, education, health, local government, prisons and our public universities.

Programs like farmer conservation and dam, dike and levy repair make up a small part of state government. That part is getting smaller. Therefore, there is little money to slow water coming through fields into the Trempealeau River. We need money to keep water on the fields to nourish crops and out of downtown Arcadia.

I came away from the meeting realizing once again that we are a community.

Workers depend on companies for jobs. Companies depend on workers to get the job done.

Everyone depends on the infrastructure created by government, a government that together we have created.

We all have a part in making political decisions. What we decide will shape the communities in which we live, making them better or worse places to raise a family, find a job, and run a business.

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