

HIGH TAXES, LOW GROWTH & MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

A Multi-Part Report by Concerned Geneva Taxpayers

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We've all seen examples of good governance and bad governance, and most can appreciate the vision, energy and commitment required to deliver the former. It never seems to “just happen”, and usually the catalyst or driver of exceptional results is readily apparent. Policy differences, disagreement on priorities, lack of funding and other factors can always frustrate forward progress or momentum, but good things rarely happen without committed engagement and strong leadership.

A major problem in Geneva in this regard is that there does not appear to be a broad acceptance and endorsement of a commonly understood vision for the City, and the specific goals that must be achieved to realize it. When discussing Geneva's future, it is striking to note the width of the spectrum of what is thought to be important, and the seeming lack of coherence when discussing priorities. Is this a chronic lack of leadership, or a reflection of the disagreement, disinterest and/or disconnection so often seen in the public square?

In a previous installment, reference was made to a study done for the Geneva Business Improvement District back in 2009. While the BID was mostly interested in how best to fill its empty storefronts in downtown Geneva, the author of that study spent a considerable amount of time in the resulting report emphasizing the need for, and apparent lack of, a vision for where the City wanted to go and what it wanted to be.

And so it seems to go. Looking back over the past 30 years or so, study after study has been commissioned on various aspects of our civic condition, presumably with good intentions all around. Yet looking at our City today, one must ask what meaningful progress has been achieved when it comes to core issues, such as the viability of the City's financial health and the vitality of its citizenry? There have been isolated successes and achievements to be sure, but, given negative trend lines on key aspects of our municipal circumstances, are we sufficiently focused and disciplined to implement needed change?

What could we change to improve governance in Geneva, beyond an increased focus on a clearly articulated vision for its future? Perhaps the most important is the need for more focused engagement on the part of a broader slice of the voting public and its influencers. The voices heard on the tough issues are typically the only voices ever heard, and those opinions are often based on long-held views/biases that perhaps should be re-examined. Why is this? How can we change it so that important issues are knowledgeably vetted from both sides of the discussion? What roll should Geneva's daily newspaper play in this?

Is there a way to formally seek input from key civic constituencies? When looking at non-profit organizations active in the City, it certainly appears that interest is high across a wide range of concerns. Can those associated with specific interests, and their unique perspectives, be harnessed to assist with broader issues of common concern? Geneva does not lack for bright and thoughtful people. How serious is the City's effort to engage them on a broader basis?

What is the role of contrary points of view, and to what extent should they be encouraged? While it seems clear that not all opinions are of equal value, how do we ensure that the public debate will fairly present both sides of an issue? How can we be comfortable that those with the microphone are being both truthful and mindful of the interests of the City as a whole? Perhaps this is asking too much of advocates on a specific issue, but surely we need to understand the process that hopefully will result in fair and wise decisions.

Good governance would also seem to imply a willingness to reach out for advice and assistance wherever available (this is not a call for more studies/consultants!). Are there one or more solutions to our most pressing civic issue, egregiously high municipal property taxes, in the State legislature or in the State or Federal courts that we should be considering? Are there law firms or public interest groups out there that could be helpful? Have we exhausted the help and assistance that might be available at the County level?

Finally, . . . accountability! But not just for our leaders. It seems reasonable to say that the voting public bears an equal or greater share of the blame for the situation in which the City finds itself. It didn't happen overnight, but rather over decades of indifference, complacency and/or bad decisions (as well as, most assuredly, other factors that may not have been within the City's control).

It appears clear enough: good governance is essentially the result of good leadership, . . . leadership that, among other things, can control, manage and direct the efforts of a diverse and complex group towards agreed upon goals and objectives. And, as we've all seen at every level of government, that's not always what you get. In the end, good governance in Geneva will only result if the electorate not only expects it but demands it. Indirectly we are collectively responsible for the quality of our City governance, and we have no one to blame but ourselves if it doesn't meet the high standard we have the right to expect.

Next and Finally - Conclusion and Call to Action

Concerned Geneva Taxpayers is a small group of individuals with a mission of informing the public about aspects of the financial crisis that is engulfing the City of Geneva and threatening

to further limit the quality of life here. More on the organization can be found at www.concernedgenevataxpayers.org.