

Six Million Reasons

By A C WHARTON

SHELBY COUNTY MAYOR

Driving across our great state, I am reminded of what an over-the-road truck driver once told me. He said, “Mister Mayor, Tennessee is as long as a bad marriage.”

But as you cover the miles on a journey from West to East, you can’t help but be struck by the diversity of our state. You leave a skyline of concrete and steel, perched on the bluff above the mighty Mississippi. You pass through the flat, fertile fields and farms of West Tennessee. You climb the green rolling hills and crest the Cumberland Plateau, then roll on eastward, climbing ever higher into mountains that stand as proud as the people who tamed them.

We are a state richly endowed with natural treasures from God: our soaring Smokies in the east, our sun crowned Cedars of Lebanon in the middle and the mightiest of river in the west, the Mighty Mississippi.

Ours is a state as different from one end to another as a hat from a shoe. Some might see that as a problem. I see it as an asset. And when you get off that interstate highway, you meet people as diverse as the land that shaped them – topographically, culturally and politically. Some might see that as a weakness. I believe it is our greatest strength. Because for all our differences, the 6 million residents of our state share one thing in common; we are all fiercely proud to call Tennessee our home.

Yes, we have 6 million residents and we are on our way to 7 million. We have not yet reached the 7 million mark in our population, and we have not yet reached the 7th day. The Book of Genesis, Chapter 1 verse 31, says “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” But ladies and gentlemen, we are on our 6th day and as we survey all around us, all is *not* good. It is not the 7th day, so we cannot rest.

We represent 95 counties. One state. Six million people. And as a people we share another commonality; we all rely on the government to handle the things we cannot handle ourselves.

When we flip a switch, we expect the lights to shine. When we turn a tap, we expect clean water to flow. We expect our roads to be smooth and our streets to be safe. Whether we voted for them or not, we expect those in elected office to answer to us and to our needs. And, of course, not one of us wants to pay a penny in taxes for any of it. I think we all have that in common as well.

Government is like a referee in a football game: never noticed until a bad call. It is all too easy today for people to see government as the problem, not the solution; to see only the ways government might restrict us, not encourage us; to tax us, not enrich us.

I think it is fair to say that as a form of government, counties have the closest relationship to the people we serve than any other form of government – cities, states, or federal government – because of the basic functions and services we perform. Whether they realize it or not, we are there for the people of this state from cradle to grave.

There’s a popular riddle that asks: What walks on four legs at dawn, two legs at noon and three legs at dusk? The answer, of course, is man. He crawls on four legs at birth, stands tall on two legs as an adult, but requires a cane in the twilight of life.

Those of us fortunate enough to hold public office have the opportunity every election year to sing our own praises and tell our citizens about all the good work we do! But there are those who do the frontline work of governing; who staff the offices; who answer the phones;

who teach our children and patrol our streets; who string the wires and turn the valves and pave the roads... when they engage the public it is usually because there is a problem.

The people we serve are much too busy with their own lives to wonder, as they drive down the road, who put down the asphalt? Who painted the lines? Who bought the equipment? Who hired the crew? Who made sure they got paid and where did the money come from? They only want their way made smooth, so they can live those lives.

During those election years, we quite reasonably gloss over our failures and trumpet our successes. We speak of our vision, our goals, our plans. Seldom do we speak of the mundane, daily business of government; the invisible work we do every day that helps our citizens in ways they never think of. Even more rarely do we talk about the people who keep the wheels of government turning. The thousands of dedicated, selfless people who do the jobs that are often, quite literally, thankless.

Our citizens need to know – and it is our job to tell them – what services county government provides, the reasons we provide those services, how we pay for those services and our overall performance record on delivering those services.

Too often today the voices that speak the loudest, and from the loftiest of podiums, parrot that old, foolish punch line that the most frightening words in the English language are, “I’m from the Government. I’m here to help.” But I can say with confidence that no one on my county payroll, and no one in this room, went into public service because they thought that government was the problem, not the solution. Otherwise, we’d all be off making a lot more money somewhere in the private sector. And in these times when private education, private medical care and private insurance are rapidly moving beyond the reach of all but our wealthiest citizens, there has never been a time when it was more vital to our good to throw away that old punch line, that old thinking, and ask, “How can we do more?”

If we were a publicly-traded company we would be required each year to publish for our shareholders a record of just how well we were doing our jobs. How well we provided our goods and services. How much revenue we took in and how we spent it. Whether we’d had a good year or a bad one. It would all be there in black and white for them to see.

As government employees, we are often the brunt of bad jokes about inefficiencies, bureaucratic red tape and lack of communication to the public. In government, we *do* make that information available, but too often it is buried in foot-thick budget documents, or lost in countless meetings of the county commission, or announced at community forums where the donuts outnumber the audience. And we certainly can’t expect the news that we found a way to trim 6 percent from our capital improvement budget to bump the latest Hollywood scandal from the front page.

But we don’t always deserve that reputation. This past summer, during a heat wave unprecedented in our state’s history, I saw members of my team – from the directors right down to the folks who turn the screwdrivers – put aside their normal duties, step outside of their job descriptions, and give up their weekends and evenings to deliver free fans and air conditioners to our most vulnerable citizens.

I fear that when they arrived on the doorstep with literally life-saving help, the words that they were probably greeted with were, “What took you so long?” But I know, too, that the smiles and the “Thank Yous” and the “God Bless Yous” that we so rarely hear enrich us in ways no paycheck or perk ever could.

The people we serve have better things to do than to keep up with the hundreds of decisions we make every week that affect their lives in ways large and small. They don’t know

how much of their tax dollar is spent on teachers, police officers, roads, health services or water lines. Of course not. They don't know, and most often they don't care. Unless we mess up, that is.

We need to bond with our people in the same way "The Little Man" in Alan Jackson's song bonded with his customers:

"Now the court square's just a set of streets
That the people go round but they seldom think
'Bout the little man that built this town
Before the big money shut 'em down
And killed the little man

He pumped your gas and he cleaned your glass
And one cold rainy night he fixed your flat
The new stores came where you do it yourself
You buy a lotto ticket and food off the shelf
Forget about the little man
Forget about the little man.

Seldom will our citizens think – if we don't tell them – what we do. And as was the case with the little man, we too will be forgotten when it comes to fixin' the flats that many of us have to drive on in a high speed interstate world.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel that it is time we changed that.

National studies indicate that our country is crying out for solutions to societal problems – security, skyrocketing health care costs, an unstable housing market and financial instability, aging infrastructure and a diminished quality of education. Citizens are starting to realize something that you and I have known throughout our careers – the private sector cannot or will not address these kinds of issues.

If they won't – we must.

Paradoxically, while our citizens are looking to all levels of government for solutions, our colleagues in Washington and at the state capitol – remembering the famous quote from Tip O'Niell that "All politics is local" – are looking to those of us at the local level to provide the answers. And they should be, because solutions for the people should come from the government closest to the people – county government.

Many of the services we are asked to deliver to citizens by the state or the federal government are funded – they are services that we are reimbursed for providing. But each year the number of things we required to do grows. And the funding does not always come with the requirement. The costs associated with unfunded mandates have skyrocketed and, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, are now estimated at \$26 billion per year.

And every time the General Assembly meets, good ideas from well-intentioned legislators turn into unfunded mandates for all of us.

These well-intended ideas along with the general public's energized efforts and interest in placing everything on the ballot as a referendum are tying our hands. Let's face it. Who wants to pay more taxes? Very few of us. But if we are to do the job that our citizens expect, and cope with the increasing responsibilities other elected officials in the legislature and Congress pass along to us, we have got to have some help.

Sometimes I feel like Ray Charles, singing *Busted*:

My bills are all due and the baby needs shoes and I'm busted
Cotton is down to a quarter a pound, but I'm busted
I got a cow that went dry and a hen that won't lay
A big stack of bills that gets bigger each day
The county's gonna haul my belongings away cause I'm busted.

I hate to beg like a dog without his bone, but I'm busted
My brother said there ain't a thing I can do,
My wife and my kids are all down with the flu,
And I was just thinking about calling on you 'cause I'm busted.

Just like the song says, my bills are all due...my baby needs shoes and I'm busted. We all feel that way! Our cows have gone dry and our hens have laid their last eggs. My brother over there, Mike Ragsdale in Knox County, says there ain't a thing I can do 'cuz he's just as busted as I am in Shelby! We all have a big stack of bills that gets bigger each day!

I am a firm believer that we have to help ourselves first. If we are going to get the relief we need, it is critical that we communicate to our citizens what we are doing every day to support them and make their lives better, their streets safer and our communities stronger and more prosperous. We have to explain that these services come with a cost, and we must have a plan to cover those costs.

The General Assembly, at Governor Bredesen's urging, just put into place wide-spread changes in the way the state funds our schools. The funding formula – the BEP – was adjusted – and, in a way that created winners and losers among us. The changes helped Shelby County, but my friend Larry Waters in Sevier County did not fare as well. Some would say that there are winners and losers in every decision, but I believe that if we all work together – and with TCSA – we can all win. Benjamin Franklin wisely advised the founding fathers “If we do not hang together then surely we will hang separately.” Participating in TCSA meetings like this one is crucial if we are going to find winning solutions to the problems and challenges we face every day.

As different as our 95 jurisdictions are, there are some challenges we all face together. Education: The future of our state lies with the 9 hundred thousand school-aged children who live in our counties. They all deserve the best schools and the best education possible. Yet, the system for funding these schools does not always allow us the flexibility we need. As county mayors and officials we are required by law to put certain resources into the educational systems in our counties on a per student basis. We are required to levy taxes necessary for capital, operations and teachers' salary equity. In Shelby County, because we have two school systems, the law says I must invest 3 dollars in the Memphis City Schools for every 1 dollar I put into the Shelby County schools. The law doesn't care that I have to burden my bonding capacity for one system in order to improve another.

Similarly, counties are required to provide for capital and operational expenses for jails. And while those jails are busting to capacity, we are required to provide for the medical care of those in our custody. State prisoners make up over 25% of pre-trial detainees statewide, but we are not reimbursed for parole violators who are held in our jails prior to their court hearing. In some cases, this can mean up to 60 or 70 days of costs without reimbursement. As a former Public Defender, I can attest that many of those who violate parole do so because they lack the skills to find employment, or they have complex social needs that range from mental illness to

alcohol and drug treatment. In urban counties, there aren't enough resources to help these people and in rural counties there are additional factors that complicate matters such as lack of jobs or transportation.

The state mandates that we pay for law enforcement and the court system. Even in the smallest of counties, this is a significant portion of any county budget. In Shelby County, the Sheriff has over 19 hundred employees but the law mandates that we cannot reduce the personnel budget without the Sheriff's express permission. As crime rises – as it has in virtually every one of our counties – so do the costs associated with law enforcement, crime prevention, courts and corrections.

Health care: Each of you would probably agree that we have a moral and ethical obligation to provide health care for our citizens. In many states, counties are statutorily obligated to do so. Yet we have little or no control over the decisions that are made with respect to that care. The federal government dictates many of the decision made about patient care, from the services provided by the doctors to the medications provided by the pharmacist. Cumbersome Medicaid regulations determine decisions about the construction and use of health care facilities. Not only are our hands tied by the federal government, they are also tied by the state government that makes decisions on how federal funding is distributed.

Each of us has a county health department and, on any given day, we collectively care for hundreds of thousands of citizens who do not have any other place to receive medical care. In urban counties, they may have the option of going to an emergency room – but your county government probably funds the indigent care in that emergency room as well. And, we're responsible for the ambulance service that delivered them to that emergency room.

Health care costs also impact us in other ways, not just the cost of caring for our constituents, but also the rising cost of providing health care insurance for our employees. Double digit increases in our employee health costs are hurting county governments large and small.

Transportation infrastructure: I know all of you can identify with this. The gas tax has grown 1 point 8 percent over the last 10 years while overall construction costs are up 20 percent in this same period. Asphalt costs are up 45 percent and steel costs are up 19 percent. Imagine: there are over 89 thousand miles of roadway in Tennessee and we are responsible for 64 percent of these roads – 57,000 miles of highway. There are over 19 thousand bridges in our state and we are responsible for almost half of them.

The list is virtually endless: solid waste management, elections, clerks, civil defense, emergency management, medical examiners, ambulance services! Our responsibilities continue to grow, and our resources continue to diminish.

Government mandates are not the only way our role is expanding. Every day the demands being placed on us are related to complex social issues. One that comes to mind is the methamphetamine problem. For years this was largely a rural problem, but it has spread into every county in our state. The problem isn't just about the production and use of meth. It illustrates how a single social issue can put stress on an entire community. The problems caused by meth aren't limited to the additional cost of law enforcement to arrest manufacturers and users. The process used to make the drug can lead to environmental contamination and property damage that will live on for decades. Pregnant women who use meth are more likely to give birth prematurely to low-birth-weight babies, usually less than 5 pounds. These babies will undergo withdrawal symptoms as if they had taken the drug themselves, and they are statistically more

likely to have birth defects and developmental disabilities. So if you think meth is today's problem, think again. It is tomorrow's problem as well.

Our citizens don't need to understand the intricate complexities of all of these issues. They pay us to understand them – and deal with them. But our citizens do need to be aware of what we are expected and statutorily obligated to do. And they need to understand that the demands placed on counties by federal and state governments have grown too large and too costly.

Our citizens need to appreciate that county government plays a vital and growing role in their lives, bringing crucial services to rural communities, our suburbs and our urban areas. When they need a police officer, a firefighter, or an emergency medical technician, they call upon county government. When they commute to work, or drive their sons and daughters to school or a soccer game, they take county highways and county bridges. When they seek fair hearings in our judicial system, they go to county courts. When they vote in local, state and federal elections, county governments oversee the polls to ensure integrity and fairness in the process.

The National Association of Counties, our national advocacy organization, has a public awareness campaign underway. It's called "Counties Serve America." Its purpose is to raise the public awareness and understanding of what county governments do and how they serve their citizens.

I'm proposing today that collectively we embark on our own public awareness campaign – Six Million Reasons. Over the next 24 months, I would like to see each and every one of us – in speeches, newsletters, and in our daily conversations with legislators, community and business leaders, the media and most importantly with our constituents – begin the important job of educating Tennesseans about what we do for them every day.

Only then will we build the support we will need in the years to come to convince the general assembly that we need their help to find the answers to our budget woes. We need a base of long-term, stable funding to take us into the next decade – 2010. As we have all experienced, the resources we need will not be handed to us on a silver platter. Maybe this sounds like a lot of work. But I can think of 6 million reasons we need to do it – the 6 million residents of our great state.