

Shouting match has an upside

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An angry conversation now and then comes with the job of newspaper editor. When we take issue with what people do or say, it's natural they will sometimes take issue with us, and not always in the most polite tone of voice.

Since arriving in Paducah 14 months ago, however, I've been lucky. Former Mayor Bill Paxton and I had a bristling exchange a few months ago over my column about the city's declining population, but other than that, I can't recall another irate encounter.

Until a few days ago. That's when Paducah City Commissioner Allan Rhodes called and engaged me in a raucous argument.

After we hung up, business reporter David Zoeller stuck his head in the door to see if there were any injuries and to say it was the first time he heard me on the phone from the other end of the newsroom.

Rhodes, 64, is serving his second term as city commissioner after spending most of his career running several Paducah car dealerships. I like it that he is a free-thinker and not shy about challenging the mayor and fellow commissioners.

We've spoken several times before, usually when I stop by Etcetera, the popular coffeehouse he and his wife Johanna own in Lower Town. Those talks, mostly about city issues, were always friendly and informative.

But his mood lately was less than cordial. He had been simmering over our editorial questioning the city's decision to go its own, more expensive way on E911 service and my columns suggesting Paducah could learn from Owensboro's bold action that revitalized its downtown.

What finally lit his fuse and prompted his call was an email I sent to him and other city officials. It asked for comment on a memo we received from Chad Chancellor, former CEO of Paducah Economic Development, chastising the city's new economic incentives policy. He is now based in New Orleans and consults with business clients looking to expand or relocate.

Chancellor said Paducah has put in place the most restrictive rules for incentivizing business expansion of any city in Kentucky. His motivation to go public with that criticism was also personal: He said the policy could stop a client of his from following through on a \$30 million to \$40 million retail development here.

In my note to the city officials, I tried to make it clear I was not siding with Chancellor but wanted them to respond for a story we were writing about his critique.

Rhodes, however, felt this was another slap in the face and picked up the phone.

He said I was once again being too negative and dismissive of positive things going on in town. I said I've expressed high regard for Paducah, but good newspapers push their communities to do more and be more. We each cited specifics, and as the conversation went on, the decibels went higher.

The next day Rhodes sent a text asking to meet, and I agreed. He said he would come to my office and bring coffee. I wondered whether it would be for drinking or throwing.

When he arrived, we sat on opposite sides of my office table. I thanked him for the coffee and for coming over and said I would be glad to start wherever he wanted.

Rhodes said he had no agenda. Then he stood up, extended his hand across the table and said what he wanted to do most was apologize.

We shook hands, and two words came quickly to mind: class act.

I told Rhodes I deserved at least half the blame and made my own apology. Then we had our best conversation yet about many issues. They included his contrarian notion that before the commission commits more than \$10 million to build a new city hall, it might see if a suitable building could be rented for maybe a decade and spend those millions on a project of greater benefit to residents.

On the question of incentives, we agreed the city should be selective in handing them out while also being flexible enough to compete with other cities. We concurred that every proposed development is different and rigid application of the new policy could cost the city some desirable businesses and economic growth.

So a bellicose shouting match turned into to a civil, productive sharing of ideas. It doesn't always work out this way, but when it does, it's very encouraging.

Thanks, Allan.

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