



Wanted: Public Service

By Brent L. White, P.E., S.E.

By the time you are reading this, the 2021 election season is behind us. Although the recent elections did not have national office implications, offices for elected officials were likely held where the reader lives. Did you participate in any way? Did you take the opportunity to vote? Have you ever considered running for elected office?

You may be wondering why I would be writing about this in an engineering magazine directed primarily to structural engineers. It definitely is not to stir partisan debate. Nor is it to advance any political agenda. Instead, it is primarily to ask the question – “What role should engineers play in public service?” Is this something you have considered personally as an engineer, no matter the stage or your career?

How well are engineers represented in the various areas of public service? Currently, nine engineers are serving among the 535 members of Congress. Six serving state governors have degrees in engineering. Is this a representative swath of engineers relative to the population as a whole? Based on current estimates, there are approximately 800,000 P.E. registrants and 60,000 licensed surveyors in the country. And some engineers do not have a professional license. In 2020, there were an estimated 200,000 engineering degrees awarded. Over the past 25 years, over 3 million individuals have received engineering degrees. Engineers should be represented at levels at least proportionate to the corresponding percentage of the population as a whole.

Without getting into a deep discussion regarding engineers participating in national politics, do these trends represent engineers at a local level? More importantly, why do I care, and why am I writing about this? I do not intend to suggest that the readers of this article should all have the interest or desire to enter politics on the national stage – although there may be some that do. I know that, personally, I do not have that desire. However, at a more local level, engineers and those with an engineering background have a lot to offer those around them in the public sphere, not necessarily by holding an elected office. Engineers that I know typically do not hesitate to become involved with professional engineering societies. Many engineers also participate with universities on advisory boards and student mentoring. Why not consider becoming more engaged in pursuits not related directly to engineering?

Engineers have specific characteristics that can be helpful in the area of public service and have much to offer. Engineers are problem solvers. It is undeniable that many problems need to be solved. Problem-solving skills developed by engineers can considerably benefit the public at large beyond the civic value from the day-to-day engineering activities of our jobs. Engineers are used to and skilled at working in teams and addressing challenging problems. Thoughtful, methodical problem solving beyond engineering is a trait that can be very beneficial to the public. The opportunities to be involved and share these skills are not limited to the elected office but extend to various opportunities for local involvement.

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Every community has school boards, planning commissions, neighborhood/community councils, city councils, county/township planning boards, various improvement/service districts, and more that can benefit from dedicated, thoughtful, competent service. Engineers participating in these settings can provide much-needed insight and balance to almost any topic and discussion. Prior experience in public service at any level is not necessary. Engineers often have developed skills beyond their engineering expertise to assist them in public service.

An engineering colleague in the eastern U.S. is currently serving as the mayor of his city. Here are some of his insights into why he decided to seek public office, why being an engineer has been helpful, and advice for engineers considering public service:

“As a small business owner, I was involved in local political races for years, and I saw the benefit that the good elected officials brought to their communities. When the opportunity presented itself to run for local office, I looked at the other officials in office and realized that my experiences were underrepresented. This was an opportunity to bring my voice to the people of my town.

Serving in public office is very time-consuming and requires a flexible schedule and the ability to make decisions. Because of that, the vast majority of elected officials are attorneys. However, engineers are problem solvers, and consulting engineers work in teams more than just about any other profession. That experience of working with other disciplines and commonly working towards solving a project or a problem uniquely qualifies engineers for public office.

The public is best served when their elected representatives can listen and improve their communities. The biggest fear people have about running for office is the criticism they receive... it's always there. However, engineers are always scrutinized for our designs and ideas, but there is no greater satisfaction as an engineer than to say, ‘I designed that.’ If you have that desire to fix things that need fixing and the confidence to know when you need to listen to others, running for office is a very rewarding thing you can do for your community. If you don't want to run for office, every town needs more engineers to sit on local boards and committees. Those are the places that have the greatest influence on your town's future, and engineers can always see the big picture of a project better than any other profession.”

I am not a politician. I am not a polished speaker. However, I appreciate the vast opportunities I have been afforded and have personally felt compelled to become involved in my community. If anyone reading this has felt or feels the same way, I encourage you to not only use your engineering skills to serve professionally but to use those same skills to serve the community (or state, etc.) where you live. ■



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