

Many people recognize Daniel Boone as an explorer and hunter; however, he also served in the Virginia legislature for several terms.

Among the gems of wisdom attributed to him is this “admission” of sorts:

“I was never lost, but I was bewildered once for three days.” –*Daniel Boone*

Likewise, over the last year, I don’t think this administration was ever lost, but we were bewildered a few times in 2009.

Bewildered as we watched our unemployment rate rise from 4.1% to 9.4% in two short years.

Bewildered as we watched money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—“stimulus” money was flowing to much larger communities with huge engineering staffs who could dispatch large projects in a matter of days.

Bewildered as the State of Indiana—which is fond of telling locals that it knows better about fiscal management than we do—missed 12 out of 12 monthly revenue forecasts...all in the wrong direction.

“Sometimes bewildered—Never Lost.” I think I’ve stumbled onto a campaign slogan for next year.

Despite the occasional bewilderment, there have been some bright spots: In the midst of the greatest recession in decades, Alexin and Nesco, two Bluffton-based companies, were selected by the Indiana Small Business Development Center as two of the “Indiana Companies to Watch.” Most Indiana cities did not have anyone who made the list: Fort Wayne had one company; Bluffton had two.

While new factory construction was nearly non-existent last year, Mike Row and the Wells County Economic Development Council pursued a strategy of not only locating new projects for existing businesses and buildings; but being aware of “competitive consolidations:” instances where companies with operations in Bluffton and other locations were considering closing one or more of those plants. The race then becomes one of making certain that the Bluffton operation is not shut down and furthermore, ensuring that some of the jobs from the closed plants are transferred here.

“Schadenfreude” is a German term that describes someone who derives pleasure in someone else’s misfortune. We certainly do not delight in plant closings anywhere, but we breathe a sigh of relief when Bluffton comes out on top. This has happened at least twice last year, and is a major component in our *comparatively* low unemployment rate.

There is an archaic term that we often hear associated with the faith community, and that is the term “to be called.” While people speak of being called to the ministry or priesthood, the phrase has its origins in the military when someone is set apart for specific service.

In these times we need to remember that we all have been “called”—set apart by the people we serve. Some have been set apart by our employers; Others have heard a Divine calling; Some of us, public servants, have been called by the electorate. Moreover, I believe, we have *not* been called to this time and this place to be timid.

As public servants, we have been called—set apart—to use, not just our treasure, but also our talents in pursuit of excellence, and, in 2009, our people were once again recognized by their peers: Pam Vanderkolk has *again* been given an award by the Indiana Parks and Recreation Association, this time for her “Destination Recreation” column in the *News-Banner*. Police Chief Tammy Schaffer was recognized as the “D.A.R.E. Agency Head of the Year” for Indiana. We have been called to work together with other agencies, without regard for politics or jurisdictional boundaries, in the service our citizens:

Last year, we were able to partner with Sheriff Bob Frantz, the Wells County Council and Commissioners and other Wells County law enforcement agencies to obtain a state-of-the-art records management system, thanks to a \$200,000 earmark from Senator Lugar; Perhaps a more visible partnership is Sheriff Frantz’s program that allows short-term, nonviolent offenders to work on city projects from painting interiors of our buildings to sweeping streets, saving us thousands of dollars.

We are called to fiscal responsibility—to be prudent, but not parsimonious: While many cities are struggling just to keep the streetlights lit and the police on the street, Bluffton is financially rock-solid. Our finances are healthy in large part because of the people I introduced earlier, as well as the people who work for them. We did not wait for a major crisis to hold spending in check. We were able to flat-line budgets and salaries in 2010 in order to maintain our financial health. Our self-insurance plan for health coverage provides our employees with a high-quality benefit at a competitive price, while allowing the city to accumulate \$1.6 million in our self-insurance fund....money that would have been paid in premiums to insurance companies. As a result of these factors, we can leverage our available cash against public and private grants to provide essential services and enhance the quality of life in our community:

We *did* receive some stimulus funds, owing to our that we were not afraid to rapidly assign priorities and respond to a stimulus request in a matter of days, while others waited weeks. This project—the milling and resurfacing of over a mile of Lancaster, Midway and Western streets, would have consumed 2½ years of Street Department annual paving budgets.

Police, Fire, Parks and Street Departments received over \$100,000 in grant funds last year and: Since January 1 of this year, we have also received allocation of nearly \$2,000,000 in federal aid *in addition to* grants already received: \$891,000 for the Interurban Trail, which will run along the west side of State Road 1 from the bridge to as far as the money will take it. This brings the total federal money for the trail to nearly \$2,000,000. The trail has been slowed because of historic preservation issues and now is scheduled to go to bid in July next year. The second, which we are announcing today, is an additional \$1,086,000 in federal aid for the Adams Street project, bringing the total federal aid on that project to over \$4,000,000. The Adams Street

project is scheduled to be bid in the May, 2011. It is a race against time to see whether the current road will hold out. Right now, time is winning.

Our balance sheet showed cash in the bank of \$14 million at year-end, with an additional federal grants receivable of \$4 million, amounts unsurpassed in the city's history. Through it all, your city tax rate—per \$100 of assessed value—is *the lowest* of any adjacent county-seat city. In the weak economy of 2009, the grants have freed up other funds, allowing us to purchase some much-needed real estate in when the market was right, including: A street department garage on South Wayne Street; The Extreme Auto lot right across Main Street from where we stand; and The current Park Maintenance facility on the riverbank.

What is our call for 2010? We know things will never be the same. Former IU economics professor Morton Marcus wrote:

“These times will test the management skills of Hoosier companies. Often it is clear how to contract. Expanding once again, however, does not necessarily mean returning to a previous arrangement of resources.”

The same will be true for your city government. For many, a first reaction is often to play defense in times such as these. When the economic storms are raging, it often seems that it might be a good idea to assume a fiscal fetal position and “hunker down,” hoping that we could stay in the cellar until the storm had passed. However, that's not what we have been called to do in Bluffton. Alexander Graham Bell observed:

“When one door closes, another door opens; but we too often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not do not see the ones which open for us.” —*Alexander Graham Bell*

It is precisely in these times that we actively prepare for the future: The Northeast Indiana Foundation, working closely with the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, is assembling leaders from the 10-county region to develop a vision for the year 2020 and then to become “relentless” in making it come true. The Regional Partnership itself is committed to its mission of attracting leads and prospects to northeast Indiana. Companies select locations in a different way today and in the future. Gone are the days when the “suits” jumped in the car and drove to prospective cities looking for first-hand information. Today, we know that most businesses use site selection firms and most of those site selection firms have weeded out 85% of the prospects without leaving their desks. Gone are the days when field of corn with an owner willing to sell was considered an industrial site. And we know that the first question on a commercial site-selectors' list is “Is the property shovel-ready?” (that is, have archaeological and soil studies been done, are utilities in place and mapped, have surveys and title searches been completed and is the owner committed to selling?). Unless the answer to this question is “yes,” we never get a second look.

The Indiana Economic Development Commission offers a shovel- ready certification that moves sites to the top of the list for consideration. Ossian has been certified as “shovel ready.” The

Regional Partnership has an even more stringent “Site Ready” program that has, thus far, identified six properties in Northeast Indiana. Bluffton has one of those six in the 130-acre Decker property on the west edge of the city, Markle has another. And there are more in the works.

The Regional Partnership is the *only* organization that has the sophisticated contact and information base to attract leads to our region, and, therefore, to our community. Even locally, we must bear in mind that Old economic development strategies will not always work in a new economy. We are part of a larger picture today.

Business prospects do not care where the county lines run.
They want to know where the fiber optic lines run.
Business prospects do not care which school district their plant will be in;
They care that their employees’ children can attend a “best buy” school.
Business prospects do not care what color or ethnicity their workers are;
They care that their employees will be welcomed into the community.

“Long-range planning does not deal with future decisions, but with the future of present decisions.” –*Peter Drucker*

Those whom we serve have set us apart for this time when history is bending. The journey will sometimes be difficult and the waters will not always be smooth. But, as Oliver Wendell Holmes said: “Sometimes we must sail with the wind and sometimes against the wind; but sail we must, and never cast adrift nor lie at anchor. Never cast adrift nor lie at anchor... For we have been called... To these places.... For these times... Thank you....and let’s get at it.