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LEADERSHIP BEGINS AT HOME

How one Liberty Leader started at the dinner table...and ended up with policy victories in his own backyard

Brian Costin's exposure to politics began at the kitchen table, where his Democrat mother and Libertarian father often debated current events and the role of government. It wasn't long before Brian started reading books by F.A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, which would solidify his beliefs in the free market and individual liberty. Today he works at the Heartland Institute as the assistant director of government relations, but his after-hours job is that of a Liberty Leader in the Schaumburg community where he grew up. Brian spoke with Richard Lorenc to discuss his goals in Schaumburg and his success in the Institute's Liberty Leaders program.

Lorenc: You aren't new to political activism.

How did you begin?

Costin: I first became involved in politics at Illinois State University, where I studied Political Science and Economics. I was elected into the Area Government, a student council dealing with campus policies. Also while in college, I started an organization called Open Debates America, which aimed to open the debates to all presidential candidates who were viable in the Electoral College – Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, Greens, Reformers, etc.

After graduating from ISU, I began to work in the mortgage industry, but I knew that politics was my passion. I decided to go back to school and received my Masters in Management of Nonprofit Administration from North Park University. I also became active in Ron Paul's presidential campaign, running the Chicago-area Ron Paul Meetup Group. The group reached almost 700 members and was featured on NBC Nightly News and an episode of NOW on PBS. In November of 2007, I was fortunate enough to join the Heartland Institute's staff as assistant director of government relations and now work full time on my passion of promoting liberty.

Lorenc: How did you decide to take a more active role in Schaumburg?

Costin: I'm originally from Elk Grove, which is right next door to Schaumburg, so I've always been familiar with the area and its political dynamics. When I heard about the Schaumburg Convention Center I found my issue—I was going to stop the village from wasting taxpayer dollars on corporate welfare programs.

“Lo and behold, the village managed to post the Treasurer's Reports within 48 hours of my putting them on my website. This taught me that government transparency is not a matter of the ability to do it, but rather the will.”

Schaumburg is a home rule town [home rule exempts municipalities with over 25,000 people from certain state mandates but allows them to operate without a charter] and they've been doing a lot of things without asking the people, including building a convention center that will cost taxpayers \$15.7 million this year alone. Basically, home rule amounts to “politician rule.”

To counter the lack of accountability, I formed the Schaumburg Freedom Coalition in September of 2008. The mission of the SFC is to ensure that the people's rights are protected from overreaching government. The SFC's main focus is on issues such as corporate welfare, tax policy, government transparency and eminent domain abuse.

Lorenc: How did you





choose transparency as one of your main issues?

Costin: From a strategic viewpoint, if you're trying to limit the size and scope of government, it's important to have as much knowledge about its inner workings as possible. The work of the Institute and the focus of its Liberty Leaders has demonstrated transparency is key. You need to be able to see the financial documents that let you know how much money is being spent and where. Only then can you propose cuts in spending.

Lorenc: How did you begin your pro-

Through FOIA requests, Costin discovered that in Schaumburg, public employees making over \$100,000 increased from 30 in 2005 to 110 in 2008.

transparency campaign?

Costin: Beginning in September, I introduced the Illinois Policy Institute's Transparency Pledge and its model legislation, which was vetted and passed in the Village of Golf. Over many board meetings

I brought up the issue, arguing that information in the hands of the public is a good thing.

The board was not only opposed, but also openly hostile to transparency. One board member told me he was insulted by the proposition and that people will start asking lots of questions and will get confused.

Lorenc: Wow. So no more Mister Nice Guy, eh?

Costin: Right. I found that I could get around the board's stonewalling by using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to acquire public documents that I would post to the Schaumburg Freedom Coalition's new website (www.schaumburgfreedom.com).

Through FOIA, I received several years of village Treasurer's Reports, employees' annual salaries (without overtime or benefits), the budget for the convention center, and a list of employees making over \$100,000 per year. (Employees making over \$100,000 increased from 30 in 2005 to 110 in 2008.)

Issuing FOIA requests is time-consuming and costly, but it seemed to be the only way to get public information about the village's finances online. I thought to myself, "If I have these documents, why don't I post them online so that everyone has access to them?"

Lorenc: How did the Village respond to the fact that you placed these documents online?

Costin: Lo and behold, the village managed to post the Treasurer's Reports within 48 hours of my putting them on www.schaumburgfreedom.com. This taught me that government transparency is not a matter of the ability to do it, but rather the will. It took shame to get the village to become more transparent.

Transparency is one of those few areas in government where you don't have to win an election or hold a majority on a board to score a victory. You just have to have a website and the time and patience to get the information.

I've continued to issue FOIA requests, and I've noticed a change in the level of responsiveness from the village itself – they're becoming more difficult when I ask for documents. For instance, I asked for 2007-2008 salary information broken down by employee and position. First they said the document didn't exist, and then they gave hourly salaries for employees (which doesn't tell anything about total compensation, overtime, or bonuses). I noticed some discrepancies when investigating a snow and ice removal program in which they were paying people over the amount they indicated in the salary list I acquired.

Lorenc: Besides being told that transparency would "confuse the citizens," do you have any other anecdotes you'd like to share about your experience?

Costin: I spoke once about the need for TIF (Tax Increment Financing) district transparency with the board. There has been a TIF district in

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downtown Schaumburg for a number of years, and it collects \$2 million annually. During this particular meeting, the board was proposing a new TIF district, and I asked if they would consider being more forthcoming with how the current TIF district's funds were being spent. As much as I wanted the proposal to fail, at the very least I wanted to make the process transparent.

When I asked why there was no transparency in the way the current TIF district works, one of the board members said that TIFs were created before the Internet was around.

Lorenc: Do you consider yourself the Schaumburg taxpayers' watchdog?

Costin: I'm not just a watchdog, but a citizen with a particular end goal in mind. I want to make sure that the resources of the community are spent well and that taxes are held in check. Schaumburg's economy is dependent on retail, which is incompatible with it having the second highest sales tax rate in the nation (after Chicago). I am concerned that the policies of the village and county are going to kill the Schaumburg economy. The village board is able to claim a scapegoat during the recession, but DuPage County—which is just down the street—is doing better business-wise due to a much lower sales tax rate.

Lorenc: What are your plans for the future?

Costin: In 2011 I want to put a transparency referendum on the ballot, as well as a referendum that would eliminate corporate welfare for the convention center, airport and baseball stadium. This would allow a 0.5% reduction in sales taxes and up to \$10 million in property tax relief.

Lorenc: What advice would you give to other Liberty Leaders?

Costin: When presenting a plan for government transparency, try to work with the board or council first. If they resist, lead by example. A website is a must-have tool to do this, and to use as a general communication and networking tool.

My website is what caused the board to move on transparency.

Don't take "No" for an answer. Read the Illinois FOIA law, and know which documents the government is required to give to you. I've been told "No" a number of times, and that's not an unacceptable answer.

Go to as many meetings as you can, and talk to as many people as possible. Do this offline, and remember to network online in the comments sections of news articles and on blogs.

But most importantly, keep your nose to the ground. Know the issues that are important in your community so that you can be relevant when you propose a pro-freedom solution. A campaign against something (like corruption, high taxes, eminent domain) is always a campaign for something else, like clean government, low taxes and strong property rights. Liberty is the most progressive political philosophy—get out there and spread the word! ☺



DID YOU KNOW?

- Since the launch of our Liberty Leaders volunteer program in June 2008, we've recruited over 120 Liberty Leaders... and counting!
- Thus far, Institute Liberty Leaders have made over \$3 billion in taxpayer expenditures accessible and transparent through online posting.