

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast

Season 4, Episode 3, “Not Every Idea Is a Good Idea”

[A message from a member of the League’s Business Leadership Council]

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[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fischer:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is The City Speak. I'm your host Luke Fischer. I'm joined today by one of Minnesota's longest-serving mayors, mayor Bob Byrnes from Marshall. [Podcast theme music fades out] He was first elected to mayor in 1992 and is serving his ninth term. Before serving as mayor, he served six years as a city council member. So he's got a lot of experience in the city world. He retired after a 40-year career with the University of Minnesota, where he was the statewide director of operations for the extension. And he's got a really expansive career perspective. And Mayor Bob thanks so much for making time to join us today.

Bob Byrnes:

Well, thank you Luke.

Luke Fischer:

So, I'm curious, what drew you to public sector service?

Bob Byrnes:

Well, it wasn't just one thing. It was when I grew up, I, my father was always involved in ...

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bob Byrnes:

... things in the community. Then when I went to college, um, I was on the student senate and so, so there was some kind of natural progression in the, the sense that, you know, we all have an obligation to give back to our community and for community service. So then when um, in 1986 there was uh, kind of a neighborhood issue that had to do with zoning. And my neighbors kinda all recruited me to be the uh, person who would speak at a planning commission meeting and ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Bob Byrnes:

... so as result of that it was like, well, the next step was the election. And then one of my neighbors said, "Well, why don't you run?" And I said, "Well, why not." So that's how I ended up, um, being on the city council. And then when I served a term-and-a-half on the city council and then the mayor was, at that time, was not gonna run for reelection and then ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Bob Byrnes:

... so, I was actually asked if I would consider running.

Luke Fischer:

So along the way you've certainly learned some lessons, you've, you've maybe made a mistake or two. And I'm curious if you've had kind of, one of those instances that, uh, you encountered something — you maybe took one approach and you learned something, you took something away — that shaped who you are as a leader today.

Bob Byrnes:

Well, the first year I was mayor, it was 1993, and that was the year of the floods. We had a flood on Mother's Day, Father's Day, and the Fourth of July.

Luke Fischer:

Wow.

Bob Byrnes:

So that was the year that really challenged all of us and helped me put into perspective, you know, how you prioritize things.

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Bob Byrnes:

And actually probably gave me a bit of confidence that, you know, doing the right thing.

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bob Byrnes:

So then several years later in my second or third term as mayor, um, I, I had an experience where... I guess I'll kind of put it under the heading of, not every idea is a good idea.

Luke Fischer:

(Laughs)

Bob Byrnes:

As a background on that, we, we have a senior center and it's a very active senior center. And at the senior center um, also it's a congregate meal site, but they also prepare the meals for the home delivered meals and also other locations around the region. Um, but at that meal site at that time we had a, a real ventilation issue in the kitchen.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Bob Byrnes:

It's gonna be quite expensive the repair, because the ventilation duct work was actually underneath the floor ...

Luke Fischer:

Mmm (affirmative).

Bob Byrnes:

... and the floor was concrete. And right about the same time we have a, had a brand new YMCA that opened and ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Bob Byrnes:

... and had a, um, beautiful facility but they also had a multipurpose room that really, uh, didn't have a specific use or a specific purpose. And I was a charter member of the YMCA and I noted, uh that, many of the same people that were at the senior center were also at the YMCA. You know they're walking the track, or their playing cards and that type of thing.

Luke Fischer:

Sure. It was serendipitous.

Bob Byrnes:

Well yeah, so I, you know, I thought well why don't we combine? And so I, I met with the YMCA Board of Directors and I said I wanna have kind of a confidential discussion with this.

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Bob Byrnes:

Bounce an idea past you. And that idea was um, that the, basically the senior center would, uh, be relocated to the YMCA. I thought it was uh, efficiencies, but what I didn't consider was the constituency.

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Bob Byrnes:

And, and of course even thought that was uh, confidential discussion, and nothing is confidential, so that message went back to the, our senior center, and really caused quite a stir there. The next thing I knew, here there's really sweet people, elderly people, that were writing letters to the editor of the paper saying,

Luke Fischer:

Oh no.

Bob Byrnes:

you know, what a crazy idea that the, the mayor has. And that was a strong lesson that was learned is that, you know, you can have an idea but you really need to listen to the constituencies um, and take, take what their ideas are and consider them. Even though something might make financial sense and be ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Bob Byrnes:

... efficient, it may not be the right thing to do.

Luke Fischer:

Ah, that's a great story. So what did you do to repair the relationship that maybe you fractured a little bit with the seniors by making this, this confidential pitch? And I say that in quotes, right? But this confidential pitch back uh, to the YMCA?

Bob Byrnes:

Well, it took some backpedaling. This was just an idea that was talked about. It isn't something that has even been discussed by the city council. And so there was some serious backpedaling and some fence mending and some personal conversations with some, who either were offended or um, or should've been talked to, or really had a uh, more of an embellished recollection of what actually happened, you know. Proposing an idea went quickly to "the mayor wants to close the senior center." Which was not it at all. So ...

Luke Fischer:

So uh, have you, have you employed any strategies coming out of that? As mayor, have there been places where a good idea seems like it's getting legs and you've put the brakes on and said "Hang on, we've got to work this around and, and get more buy-in on the project?"

Bob Byrnes:

Many times we've have learned that really needed to do that. That, you know, it really takes community input and you need to take the time to really have those discussions. And that's really what a representative form of government should be. As a leader, you need to kind, of embrace some ideas that may or may not come from, you know, yourself or others ...

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Bob Byrnes:

... on the council, but there's a lot of good ideas there. And as a leader you need to kind of move forward.

Luke Fischer:

Well that's great, you know, as a leader, as you mentioned, it's not always easy, too. And I'm curious, what keeps you going, what keeps you resilient? And what keeps you uh, signing up for reelection each time and asking the voters to, to send you back into office?

Bob Byrnes:

Well, first off, you have to have a sense of humility and a sense of service. But then also, there's, there is probably always one more thing that you're interested in or need ...

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Bob Byrnes:

... you need to follow through on. Whether that's a big infrastructure project, or whether — in our case it was flood control, or an events center — there's like, always one more thing that, you know, is important and you really wanna see that through.

Luke Fischer:

Wow, that's great. Marshall certainly is a beautiful community and a great city to visit. It's a place that, I know you and I have had the opportunity to get together in couple of times. And I've really appreciated your hospitality and would certainly recommend that anyone head out to Marshall and drop by and check out the new Veterans Memorial, or the new City Hall, um, if they're in the area. Mayor Bob, thank you so much for making some time for us today, for sharing your story with us, and I hope that you stay well.

Bob Byrnes:

Thank you, and also thanks to the League of Minnesota Cities.

Luke Fischer:

As you can tell there's a reason why Mayor Bob has been elected nine terms as mayor of the city of Marshall. He's a great leader and he's got good perspective. I think one of the things I would take away from his story today, was that not every idea is a good one. And as a leader, it's our job to take input from others and balance things out to come to the right outcome in the end. That's something I'll take away from our conversation today and that's something I hope you take away too.

That's it for our show. Thanks to Mayor Bob Byrnes of Marshall, [Podcast theme music begins] and to all of you out there listening doing the hard and rewarding work that cities do. You can find us in all of the places where podcasts are found, and you can rate or review us there as well. We'd love to hear from you along the way, so please send us suggestions or comments to podcasts@lmc.org. Thank you so much everyone for tuning in, and be well. [Podcast theme music ends]