

# The Gazette

## The loudest critics of government want to run your city council

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Those of us who believe in radically limited government have spent immeasurable time and effort criticizing the Washington D.C. It's not a difficult task, given our undeclared wars, unchecked federal largesse and unconscionably huge body of federal regulations.

But when it comes to local government, our common talking points about free markets and spontaneous order are rarely satisfying, even to true believers.

"City council runs on drink, drive and flush, those are your three issues — good roads, good water infrastructure, and good sewers," said Cara Schulz, a member of the Burnsville, Minn. City Council.

'A pothole is a pothole — how is it going to get filled?'

- Nick Taiber

Former Cedar Falls City Council member

Schulz is a candidate recruitment specialist for the national Libertarian Party. She hosted a campaign planning workshop at the Libertarian Party of Iowa's state convention last month in Cedar Rapids, emphasizing the need to put forth practical solutions for basic municipal needs.

As one real-life example, Schulz said her constituents sometimes lobby to replace the city's private garbage removal services with a city-run system. As a libertarian compromise, Schulz has worked with groups of citizens to voluntarily contract waste removal at the neighborhood level, no city mandates or spending required.

"Telling them, 'The market will decide,' that's telling them, 'I don't care about your problem,'" Schulz said.

However you measure it, libertarians — members of the Libertarian Party, or adherents to the broader ideological movement — are at most a medium-size slice of the American populace.

Fewer than 1 percent of all registered voters nationally are Libertarians, according to Ballot Access News. Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson earned about 3 percent of the votes cast in the 2016 presidential election, the party's best showing ever.

Small-l libertarians — people like me, who believe in the philosophy, but aren't party members — are somewhat more numerous.

A 2015 poll by Reuters found around 20 percent of respondents said they consider themselves libertarians. Cato Institute research fellow Emily Ekins estimated in 2017 the portion of Americans who generally subscribe to libertarianism is anywhere between 7 and 22 percent.

Nevertheless, the movement for smaller government has made enormous contributions to national policy, perhaps outpacing our representation in the electorate, winning legislative elections, presidential cabinet appointments and even Supreme Court confirmations.

Influential think tanks and interest groups promoting libertarian ideals have put forth an enormous body of work focused on reducing the size and scope of the federal government and state governments.

But on local policy concerns, the literature is sometimes lacking. How would the most fervent skeptics of government power run a city, county or school district?

“From a local perspective, people’s concerns are very tangible. If you speak to ideology at the local level, it doesn’t resonate the same way. A pothole is a pothole — how is it going to get filled?” said Nick Taiber, who served on the Cedar Falls City Council from 2009 to 2017.

Taiber’s approach to local governance is more practical than ideological. The goal is to make local government more efficient and effective, not to dismantle it.

Like several other cities in Iowa, Cedar Falls has struggled to control taxpayers expenses at its public golf course. A compromise emerged in 2016, with the city maintaining ownership of the golf course itself, but outsourcing operations to a private contractor.

“It’s that operator that takes the economic risk in operating the golf course, but the city maintains the land asset. Rather than having anywhere between \$200,000 to \$500,000 in taxpayer support, it’s now zero,” Taiber told me.

The Libertarian Party counts 10 registered members currently holding elected office in Iowa — seven city council members, two township trustees and one county attorney. Greene County Attorney Thomas Laehn was the first Libertarian to win an election to a partisan office in the state last year.

To my knowledge, none of those elected officials have attempted to eliminate funding for public roads or legalize recreational heroin, a couple common fears among the movement’s critics.

From here, party organizers hope to grow their ranks in city council chambers across the state.

“We’re essentially playing in the wrong sandbox a lot of the time. Not to say we’re not going to run candidates for governor or for president, but we need folks who are going to run for city council,” said Joseph Howe, chairman of the Iowa Libertarian Party.