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Steven Scott

FROM THE ROOTS UP

How to run a grassroots political campaign with Seattle City Council candidate, Grant Cogswell

Politics, especially during election time, have a way of making voters (and non-voters) feel disconnected and confused — partly because they're not aware of the issues, and partly because it's difficult to figure out what the hell is going on and who to trust. You may not consider yourself politically inclined, and perhaps you don't even know the names of our current city council members, let alone those who are running for office this year. It's quite possible that you've never even voted and don't intend to start doing so. The truth is that local government does have an effect on your quality of life and much can be accomplished by voting for the right candidate. Not all politicians are stuffed shirts with empty agendas.

A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to work with a group called Free Speech Seattle, an organization that intended to repeal the poster ban with a citizen's initiative. I learned a lot from my first political experience and I met a lot of interesting people, including Grant Cogswell, a cab driver/poet/activist, who offered his support to our initiative. His endorsement of I-46 meant a lot to us; as Cogswell had worked on one of the most successful local grassroots campaigns, The Monorail Initiative.

When Cogswell announced that he was running against Richard McIver (Chair of Seattle City Council's Transportation Committee) this past July, I was elated. Finally, someone was running for office whom I know, and without a doubt, shares my views about the importance of communities over cars. Someone I know will address the issues of gentrification, transportation and urban sprawl. And, most importantly, he's someone who knows how frustrating Metro is because he actually rides the bus!

Tablet: Tell me about the defining moment that led you to run for city council.

Grant Cogswell: I had met a lot of people in the WTO protests, and activists fighting the FTAA who had really turned over a lot of their lives to a political struggle, and I admired them enormously. I was approached by

some supporters in the early spring who were looking to back someone to run against [Richard McIver]. There were a couple of strong contenders considering it who I thought would be terrific, and I held back in the hopes one of them would step up. Neither did and when I got the word at the beginning of July that I was the last one left, I went on an overnight hike with some friends to Snow Lake. Coming back from there we drove across the little L.A. starter-kit Issaquah has turned into, and I was just thinking, I cannot stand by while this place is destroyed, and I went in and filed the next day.

Tablet: Do you feel your involvement in the punk community helped you get involved in politics and activism?

GC: Absolutely. I was a suburban Republicanish kid. [I would drive] around in my '73 Capri listening to the Clash's song, *I'm So Bored With The U.S.A.*, a statement I was entirely against, [yet] it was delivered with such passion and humor that I found it irresistible, [and wondered] why someone would think like that. A lot of minimum-wage existence over the next several years pushed me the rest of the way. The whole pre-*Nevermind* indie scene really felt like a secret society blowing back in the face of TV, materialism, political spin, war-mongering, suburban sprawl ... a way of moving through society with integrity. When [I] saw people creating something ignored by the larger culture, on their own terms, and then saw it ballooning into the leading edge of the larger culture, it inspired [me] to think that [I] might be able to make anything happen at all. I would never have had the confidence to take over the Monorail campaign had it not been for the shows I was going to, and records on SST, Sub Pop and Homestead.

Tablet: What's a typical day like in the life of a city council candidate during a campaign, especially in the final weeks? How many staff members and volunteers do you have?

GC: I have three staff members, two volunteer and one paid, who I see every day. There are a few volunteers on the periphery who I don't see regularly, and about fifty people on call to go flyer-ing or who are doing data entry or building signs or distributing literature. A campaign day starts late and ends late, unless you have a morning radio interview or something. Around 10am, I start answering e-mails and making phone calls, [then] meet at noon with my campaign manager and volunteer coordinator. Maybe there's an appearance to put in at a retirement home or a meeting downtown. The evening is usually two or three appearances, neighborhood forums, community council meetings, finishing up around 9:30pm.

Tablet: You've raised a fair amount of money for your campaign. Since there's a lot of talk about fundraising in any campaign, can you briefly explain why it's so important to raise money and what the greatest expenses of running a campaign are?

GC: You always need more money when you're running against an incumbent who is backed by big corporate contributors like [Richard McIver]. At first you just need money to show you have it, that people care enough to back you, thus proving you can win. We have raised money as fast as my opponent since we entered the race — but he was already 60 grand

ahead. Ideally we need at least another \$20,000 at this point to do the mailings that we hope to do. That would put us at around fifty grand, total, which is the minimum I expected it would take. If everybody reading this sends in \$25, we could do it. For a volunteer-based campaign like this, mailings and literature are the big thing. I don't hire consultants; I know how to do what they get 30 grand for: designing literature, press releases, deciding what I'm supposed to say.

Tablet: As a non-career politician, have you felt any discrimination from the political and media communities?

GC: Political, of course. I know that the Womens' Political Caucus and the Washington Conservation Voters simply didn't endorse me because they weren't sure I could win, which is ridiculous, considering how much more their concerns are on my agenda than my opponent's. The difference between someone who has been playing the game from the inside and a grassroots activist when meeting with the district Democratic organizations, is immense. Still, I managed to share an endorsement at the 32nd up near Shoreline and keep my opponent from getting endorsed in the 43rd (Capitol Hill, the U-District, Fremont and Wallingford). The weekly papers and small bi-monthlies like *The Seattle Press* and *The Jet City Maven* are more activist-oriented, and they have been supportive. The dailies' reporters have done a good job, but those are large institutions and always slow to move. And of course TV doesn't cover local issues at all, and everybody there just arrived from Omaha two weeks ago anyway, and probably don't even know if they are Seattle residents or not.

Tablet: If someone with no experience came to you and asked for advice about running for city council, or another office, what would your advice be?

GC: Campaigning takes over your life, your thoughts, your dreams, your relationships, your finances and all your time. Make sure you know what you're doing. Candidates without a compelling reason to run for the exact seat they are seeking, and who lack a plan for action if elected, look silly. Learn how to speak to large and sometimes hostile groups of people at a moment's notice, without flinching, losing the thread of your argument, shaking your leg, mumbling, or looking like a wacko. This takes practice. Political office is a tool to get very specific things done. I am highly suspicious of people who run on the merits of their own fabulous character, but have no particular plans in mind. I want to get us a regional transit system, soon, and keep the cost of living in this city down, protect the environment, nurture the arts, get independent police review, and stop building some jerk a stadium or a garage whenever [he wants] one. This is my National Service. Four years and [then] I'm moving on, and somebody reading this will have to take my place.

Make sure to vote on Tuesday, November 6. For more information on Grant Cogswell, go to www.cogswellforseattle.org. For The Secretary of State's online voter's guide, go to www.vote.wa.gov.

Article by Beth Fell.