

November 13, 2009

An open letter of appreciation to the City of Salem Council, Administration, and Departments

Dear Editor,

In our society, we are often inclined to take things for granted. Occasionally it takes unusual or extraordinary circumstances to prompt us to pause, reflect, and to be appreciative. The high level of cooperation and collaboration between the City of Salem and Salem City Schools, for example, are so commonplace that many residents do not realize that the City and the School Division are actually separate legal entities.

Organizational sharing of resources for building maintenance, servicing the bus fleet, communications, and many finance operations, are behind-the-scenes, but produce efficiencies that benefit to every citizen. Facility sharing and program collaboration with the Parks and Recreation Department and the Salem Civic Center is so remarkable that I routinely field questions and receive compliments that I dutifully pass on to my friends “on the City-side” who are actually responsible for the high level of service.

But when challenges come, relationships are tested. When the flood waters *literally* rise, we are less inclined to take things for granted.

Having returned from a trip abroad just one day before the heavy rains from Tropical Storm Ida arrived; my appreciation for our country was already renewed. Returning home in time for Veteran’s Day provided yet another profound opportunity to be thankful for my many God-given blessings that have been and are this very day preserved by brave men and women in service to our country.

The Central Office staff began Thursday in the pre-dawn hours reviewing real-time road and weather information to determine if any changes to the start of the school day were necessary. Assistant Superintendent Mike Bryant worked with the street, police and fire departments and made sure bus routes were adjusted properly to ensure that Salem’s school children began their day with the same degree of normalcy and professionalism they encounter on days when flood warnings aren’t on the radar.

Throughout the morning, communication with various agencies and especially City Departments was characteristically excellent. Although our preference is always to maintain routine and normalcy for our students in their schools, a personal conversation with the National Weather Service revealed that the Roanoke River was expected crest at approximately the time that would coincide with the end of the school day. A quick call to Salem Fire Department Chief, Pat Counts confirmed that an early dismissal was warranted so that bus routes would be complete before the flood waters reached maximum levels.

Using the School Board’s new notification system, 8,398 phone calls were made and 2,980 email messages were delivered in a matter of minutes and our amazing parents and other care givers responded accordingly. Communication with City Departments was ongoing and even featured a personal call to my office from the City Administration letting me know that while Colorado Street

would have to be temporarily closed to clear debris from a coffer dam that the contractor was aware that it had to be reopened well before our elementary schools dismissed early at 12:15 PM. Students, parents, schools, bus drivers, and the City Departments worked together extremely well. Our students were home and the buses were back at the garage well before the river crested.

That is not the end of the story, however. Like most relationships, the behind-the-scenes work is ongoing. Long after dark, while finally on my way to be with the three students who live in my home, I was pleased with how well traffic was moving across the Union Street/Eddy Avenue Bridge, especially considering the high volume caused by the Mill Lane closure. I was pleased, but not surprised, when I discovered Salem Police Officers ushering traffic through the four way stops with lighted batons. One may expect this level of service on a commercial thoroughfare, but here were Salem's finest helping residents have better commute home at the end of a wet and potentially worrisome day. Still fewer citizens are likely aware that the Street Department was clearing debris and from closed streets at 3:00 AM so that the Friday morning commute (and bus routes) would be uninterrupted.

Even as I compose this letter, we are in the process of debriefing and learning from these most recent weather-related events. As well as things went, as fortunate as we were that the waters did not go higher, the Salem Way involves always resolving to get better and the Salem Way applies equally to both the School Division and the City however technically separate our organizations may be.

More challenges will come. The Commonwealth's economy has declined for two years in a row for the first time since the Great Depression and soon winter weather will again test the communication and collaboration that are the hallmark of our relationship with the City. These and other challenges will be met, not with perfection, but with focused effort to ensure that Salem's children come first...a collective community value that actually helps preserved our quality of life.

On behalf of the City of Salem School Division and the nearly 4000 children we serve, thank you to the City Council, Administration, Department Heads, and especially the men and women who daily do what many of us take for granted.

Sincerely,

H. Alan Seibert, Division Superintendent

Note: Readers interested in learning more about how the school division makes inclement weather decisions are encouraged to read the Inclement Weather FAQ available online at:

<http://saalem.k12.va.us/salemdiv/superintendent/FAQSchoolClosingsandDelays.html>