

# Holding your Elected Officials ACCOUNTABLE

Friends of SEHN,

Well, the elections are over. You, like us, probably have mixed feelings about the outcome. But now is a good time to take up the work in earnest and hold your elected officials accountable for the policies that they will carry out as representatives of the community.

Here's a Q and A that you can use to talk with your officials and help prepare them for their responsibilities.

Carolyn Raffensperger  
*Executive Director*



## **Q. What is government for?**

**A.** Government's primary responsibility is to take care of all the things we share. Government holds in trust the common wealth and public health for present and future generations. We share a vast storehouse of treasures that range from water, air, wildlife, bridges, roads, parks and other public lands, public schools and so much more. The commons that government is responsible for fall into three broad categories, infrastructure, the natural world, and the public's money.

Some people hold the limited and outdated view that government is primarily to grow the economy and promote jobs. However, without the commons, it is almost impossible to have a robust economy or meaningful jobs.

**Q. So what would a government body or agency do if they take seriously their fiduciary duty as the trustees of the commons?**

**A.** There are three things they would do. First, they would take an inventory of the commons in their jurisdiction. Is the water clean? Are the schools and roads in good shape? Is the budget in order?

Second, they would tailor the budget to the commons for which they are responsible. The basic motto is "the public's money in public hands for the public good." Is the budget dedicated primarily to taking care of the infrastructure, the natural world and good stewardship of money? Or is it used to enrich private corporations? Is it held in local banks that have not been sanctioned for fraud? Is the revenue stream sufficient to take care of the commons held in the public trust?

Third, government would care for the commonwealth by using the precautionary principle which aims to prevent harm in the face of scientific uncertainty. It does this by setting goals, identifying and choosing the best alternative to harmful activities, making polluters or those who would impact the commons in harmful ways to bear the burden of showing they will not harm the community and involving meaningful participation of the community in decision-making.

**Q. What is the measure of government?**

**A.** The measure of a policy or budget expenditure is whether we pass on the common assets to future generations unimpaired. That is, that they are in as good or better shape than when we inherited them.

**Q. What is the responsibility of community members like me?**

**A.** It is to make sure that you give or withhold your consent to activities that affect the community's future. Is government caring appropriately for the infrastructure, natural world and public money? If it is not, you owe them your dissent. They owe you adequate information to give your consent freely before the decision is made. Legitimate government is based on the consent of the governed.

**Q. Where can I start?**

**A.** Start with the part of the commons that you particularly love or are particularly concerned about. A state park? A river? The atmosphere and climate? Use that as an

example in your conversation with your elected official. If you love something, defend it. You can do this.