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PLATTE CHAT

Suttle's Campaign Pledges: One Year Later

By Alex West
Platte Institute

It's rather common knowledge among politicians and perceptive observers that when it comes to politics, details lead to division. That is why the successful candidate frequently seems to be the one who divulged the least about any particular issue during the campaign. For this reason, campaigns do their best to give as generic a message as possible, thus maximizing their appeal. This is not necessarily because more detailed political messages are too complicated for the casual observer, but rather that even in a room of the most like-minded people the small print tends to be divisive.

As a result, whenever a politician does venture to give some detail about how they will govern and what actions they will take, people listen. Over time these "details" have become known as campaign promises, and more often than not these promises help to get politicians elected. Consequently, reconsidering a politician's campaign pledges from time to time is an important aspect to keeping politicians responsible.

Campaign Promises: Where to Find Them

One excellent source for unearthing campaign promises is in the content of campaign television ads. Due to the high cost, sizable audience, and brief length of commercials, campaigns

outstanding way to partake in the discussion and have your voice heard by thousands of people. To make the process easier, the Platte Institute has assembled a list of links which allow you to submit a letter to the editor to nearly all Nebraska newspapers. Simply [CLICK HERE](#) for a listing of the newspapers and follow the appropriate link to submit your letter.

Contact Us

If you would like to contact someone at the Platte Institute, you are always welcome to give us a call, drop us an email or stop by the office. Our telephone number is 402.452.3737. We are located at 10050 Regency Circle – Suite 120 – in Omaha. Below is a list of staff email address:

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attempt to efficiently condense a candidate's message into a concise advertisement, limiting themselves to those credentials and issues that will best benefit their candidate. With the one year anniversary of Omaha Mayor Jim Suttle's inauguration approaching, the time seems right for an evaluation of his commitment to the plans laid out in his campaign commercials. There are about 12 campaign promises embedded in four campaign commercials ranging from reducing the dropout rate^[1] all the way to keeping civility in city hall^[2], but by limiting the evaluation to pledges that are verifiable and directly impacting the economic conditions in Omaha, the focus narrows to cutting waste,^[3] ^[4] lowering property taxes,^[5] ^[6] bringing clean energy companies to Omaha,^[7] and acquiring stimulus dollars.^[8]

Cutting Waste: What Waste?

Cutting waste in city government was a credible claim by candidate Suttle, whose two-term service on the City Council gave him the opportunity to become familiar with numerous yearly budgets. The image of Suttle as a penny-wise politician was also supported by the fact that he played a visible role in the effort to maintain Rosenblatt as the home of the College World Series and to forego a new, expensive downtown stadium. After becoming mayor, however, Suttle's message began to move away from cutting waste toward raising taxes. Instead of applying his specialized knowledge and gumption to lead to timely cuts and thus lifting the burden of wasteful spending on the city, the new Mayor painted a picture of an emaciated city government, already "stretched thin and struggling to get by with limited resources."^[9] According to the Mayor's 2010 budget presentation, there was "little room left to make spending cuts" because the city had already been making slashes in staffing, deferring equipment purchases, and skipping regular maintenance of city property since 2001.^[10]

Yet during the midst of this budgetary crisis, Suttle decided to hire a portion of his staff at substantially higher salaries compared to those in the previous administration,^[11] and though the mayor made spending cuts in other areas, his efforts fail to reach the magnitude that he previously implied they would. We know this because Suttle said, "I'll cut waste in City Hall, modernize city services, and put more services online. That's how we're going to lower property taxes."^[12] Logically, this means there should be enough savings among the three above-mentioned improvements to lower property taxes, but

this has not come to pass.

Property Taxes: Going Up

The idea that Suttle ever intended to cut enough waste and streamline city services to the point where he could lower property taxes is hard to imagine. This is not because he has yet to fulfill that pledge in this term, but because he pursued a property tax increase in his 2010 Budget Presentation to the City Council less than two months after his inauguration. Despite fighting elements of opposition on the City Council, the Mayor eventually got his tax hike [13] at the expense of his own word just a few months before.

Clean Energy Companies: Growing Business

Suttle also said he would bring clean energy companies to the city, and he has followed through with this general commitment to all things green. Through neighborhood grants, public awareness, and a new Sustainability Coordinator, the mayor continues to demonstrate a willingness to commit time and resources to making the city sustainable.[14] More directly related to the pledge, under the Mayor's watch a new clean energy-related venture is now in the city -- a wind power training facility -- which hopefully represents a down payment on expanding Omaha's share of the emerging clean energy industry.[15]

Stimulus for Omaha: Overstated, So Far...

The acquisition of stimulus funds was also a key guarantee of the Suttle campaign and, since the passage of the stimulus package; Omaha's share has grown upwards of \$28 million-- much of it secured under the Suttle administration.[16]

Unfortunately for the city, this sum is substantially lower than the amount of money the Suttle campaign suggested could be secured. In one of his campaign commercials, Suttle himself said that he would "fight for our share of the President's economic stimulus package so we don't have to pay for the unfunded mandate to rebuild our sewer system." [17]

The project Suttle referred to is estimated to cost \$1.7 billion,[18] which is significantly more than the \$28 million in stimulus cash directed towards Omaha. Of that \$28 million, only \$15 million is marked for sewer, and nearly \$13 million of that is in the form of loans that must eventually be repaid. Thus, the stimulus contribution up till now is a far cry from covering

the expenses of the sewer rebuild project, covering less than 1% of the projected cost.

However, the story is still unfolding. With \$168 billion in stimulus grants, loans, and contracts left to be paid out^[19] and Mayor Suttle's recent selection to a Mayor's Council charged with lobbying for stimulus cash to pay for unfunded federal mandates across the country, the status quo could change.^[20]

Tallying the Score

Suttle's record of fidelity to campaign promises over the past year shows mixed results on the economic front. For instance, while he abandoned his campaign stance of lowering property taxes by cutting waste and modernizing city services, Suttle followed through with his commitment to attracting new clean energy companies. Another ambiguous portion of the evaluation is Suttle's commitment to securing enough of the federal stimulus package to pay for the unfunded mandate to rebuild Omaha's sewer system. The process for which, though bleak, is still unfinished. Finally, consider Suttle's inconsistencies in maintaining his commitment to campaign promises. In view of those pledges where Suttle has fallen short, the cynical might say hyperbole is just part of the electoral process, while others might contend that times change and therefore so do the solutions. In any case, voters will need to find contentment in the pledges that are fulfilled, and judge for themselves those incomplete or negated assurances.

^[1] Jim Suttle For Mayor: Same.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBfgzG0eDso> (May 13, 2010).

^[2] Ibid. 1

^[3] Jim Suttle: Nothing Subtle.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fY0pHz8Q3Ok> (May 13, 2010).

^[4] Jim Suttle: Yard Signs.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GF50S1qYH34> (May 13,

2010).

[5] Ibid. 4

[6] Ibid. 3

[7] Ibid. 3

[8] Ibid. 4

[9] Suttle, Mayor Jim. 2009. "2010 Budget Demonstration." July 21. <http://www.co.douglas.ne.us/omaha/mayor/images/stories/2010%20Budget%20Presentation.pdf> (May 27, 2010).

[10] Ibid. 9

[11] Cordes, Henry and Maggie O'Brien. "Scant sacrifice seen in finance director's salary - A city councilman questions the higher pay when the city is making cuts elsewhere.." *Omaha World-Herald*, 18 Jul. 2009.

[12] Ibid. 4

[13] Brennan, Joseph. "Mayor extends olive branch after property tax hike riff - Suttle says he never intended to raise the tax rate without the City Council's OK.." *Omaha World-Herald*, 16 Aug. 2009.

[14] <http://www.cityofomaha.org/mayor/mayors-office-home/archives/category/green-initiatives> (May 27, 2010).

[15] "Omaha Windmill Training Facility Opens: Center to Become Hub for Wind Energy Industry." *KETV.com*. 16 October, 2009. <http://www.ketv.com/money/21310621/detail.html?taf=oma> (June 1, 2010).

[16] This figure is constructed from data on the Mayoral website <<http://www.cityofomaha.org/mayor/component/wordpress/economic-stimulus>> as of June 1, 2010. In some cases, the figures are in conflict with those available from the federal government on Recovery.gov. For instance, a \$4 million grant listed on Recovery.gov goes unlisted on the Mayor's website while other grants and loans mentioned on the Mayor's website are not immediately available on Recovery.gov while searching under grants, loans, and contracts for the "City of

Omaha."

[\[17\]](#) Ibid. 4

[\[18\]](#) O'Brien , Maggie. "Suttle goes in search of sewer-upgrade funds-Omaha's mayor has been named to a group trying to get federal cash for the costly project." *Omaha World-Herald*. March 30, 2010.

[\[19\]](#) Recovery.gov (June 1, 2010).

[\[20\]](#) Ibid. 18

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