

Group inspires leaders to be agents for change

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[By Natalie Myers](#)

PBN Staff Writer

Fred Presley doubts he would have jump-started the successful drive to recall former Smithfield Town Council President Stephen G. Tocco last month without empowerment from Providence &Beyond, a New Commons program that engages state leaders in discussions about change, innovation and sustainability.

Presley, former director of planning and economic development for Smithfield, decided not to back down when Tocco became embroiled in a series of events that resulted in charges of violations of the separation of powers between the council and town administrators, among other things.

Instead, Presley wrote a letter to The Providence Journal detailing his point of view. He did so because some of his colleagues had decided not to confront Tocco over the allegations.

Presley says inspirational speakers at Providence &Beyond events taught him "there was something we could do. We could say: 'No.' "

Presley was one of nine Providence &Beyond charter members who spoke earlier this month about what they learned and accomplished during the past three years the platform has existed.

Providence &Beyond consists of about 50 volunteer charter members from organizations such as the City of Providence, Cornish Associates LLC, the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, Raytheon Co., the R.I. Economic Development Corporation, Roger Williams University, Struever Bros. Eccles &Rouse, the Providence Geeks and the Apeiron Institute for Environmental Living.

Providence &Beyond does not make a profit for New Commons – it is a service to the community, said Robert Leaver, its co-program director principal of New Commons, a Providence-based think tank and consultancy.

The think tank finds sponsors to fund the speakers and food at the events and donates staff time to organize and host the events, Leaver said.

Kip Bergstrom, executive director of the R.I. Economic Policy Council, also spoke at this month's event. He said one of the most inspiring concepts he gathered from the past year of Providence &Beyond meetings was the idea that it's the strength of the "middle" tier of state or local leaders that creates change.

The idea came from speaker Charlie Leadbeater from CEOs for Cities, a Chicago-based nonprofit composed of a national network of mayors, corporate CEOs, university presidents, foundation officials and business and civic leaders who act as an idea lab for cities.



The idea of the “middle” also inspired Presley, who decided to submit his resignation after Tocco scheduled a special meeting to fire the town manager of Smithfield. Presley said he wanted to “motivate the middle” to do something about it.

Presley’s resignation inspired the building and zoning commissioner to submit his resignation and the town engineer to submit his retirement papers, so that the entire land development group would leave at the same time.

The resignations and retirements received coverage from The Providence Journal and eventually led to an investigation of Tocco’s involvement in a public corruption scandal at the State House and the subsequent first-ever recall of a head of town government – Tocco – in the state of Rhode Island.

“For me, [the experience] really showed the ability to do the impossible,” said Presley. He’s now forming a company called Resilient Planning Alliance.

Providence & Beyond members also discussed the future of the platform at this month’s meeting. They decided to take on projects that include helping find ways to make state government more efficient.

Bergstrom is excited about the opportunity “to really think about a revolution in the structure of state government ... getting beyond the administrative state to something different ... really looking at the structure of the executive branch itself,” he said. •