Lambert works to improve public view of government

By Grant Welker
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Dartmouth — For his first public event since he stepping down as Fall River mayor last year, Edward M. Lambert helped assemble a conference on a topic he knows well: the role of government in society.

Lambert, now director of the Urban Initiative for the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Policy Analysis, led the university's co-sponsorship of a conference Wednesday with the bipartisan statewide networking group ONE Massachusetts. The gathering asked how to rebuild the public's familiarity with and confidence in government.

Local officials, business leaders and agency heads were given suggestions to improve the public perception of government — like talking about goals instead of funding or taxes, connecting services and programs to how they can create a better quality of life and making sure taxpayers understand where their money goes.

"We want to change people’s attitudes toward government," said Judy Meredith, executive director of the Public Policy Initiative and a member of ONE Massachusetts. The newly formed agency will train more than 100 activists in May to help reach its goal of increasing understanding of budgets, taxes, the government’s responsibilities and citizens’ abilities to shape policy.

Patrick Bresette, an associate program director for the Texas-based public policy research group Demos, showed results from a recent study that revealed many people's first reaction when thinking about government: a laugh. Other respondents said the aspect of government they were most familiar with — politicians — was the most negative part.

"Government has become a kind of shared cultural joke," Bresette said. The study also found that people make "mental shortcuts," or simplify issues, to help make sense of the world and often approach issues with preconceived notions. Thoughts on government's role in peoples' lives are often the same across party lines, he said.

But, Meredith said, when people are asked what they look for most in a community — education, safety, and parks, for example — they don’t realize those amenities are provided by the government. Many others often don’t know the difference between which services are public and which are private, Bresette said.

"It will take a longterm, thoughtful and concerted effort to change public discourse about government over time," Bresette said.

"Somewhere along the line," Lambert said, "we lost faith in the government. People are disconnected from local issues."

It is important that citizens understand what is going on in their local government, he added. Many town issues, like Proposition 2 1/2 overrides, "require all of us to be more intelligent and knowledgeable," Lambert said.

Meredith wanted conference attendees to "take the lessons to heart," she said, and spread more positive public sentiment. The UMass-Dartmouth conference is one of many held throughout the state by ONE Massachusetts.

Eleanor Gagnon, a Somerset selectwoman, said after the conference that what she learned affirmed her efforts to make sure she is open with residents on her decisions and the way the town government works.

"Any time you can learn to better communicate, it's an asset," Gagnon said. "The government needs to be more truthful. I believe in asking questions so we can all make better decisions."

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