

Local politicians making good use of social media

Leaders careful not to make Weiner's mistake

By Evan B. Kozierachi Times-News

ekozierachi@thetimesnews.com

The case of New York Rep. Anthony Weiner, who resigned after controversy over lewd pictures he posted online, provides a cautionary tale for public figures using social networking sites.

But local politicians said that sites like Twitter and Facebook are effective ways to reach out to constituents and that they don't separate their private and public lives online.

"I don't have any privacy restrictions (on Facebook), and everyone can see my Twitter. That's my default," said Tony Rose, a member of the Alamance-Burlington Board of Education. He uses Facebook, Twitter, and foursquare.

Of the three sites, Facebook is the most comprehensive. Users create personal profiles and then can add other users as friends and exchange messages, including automatic notifications when they update their profiles or statuses.

A Facebook status update is similar to a tweet on Twitter. Both are limited in size by number of characters, and friends or followers are immediately notified of each new post.

And "foursquare is like places on Facebook; it associates your current location with your tweets," Rose added. Rose uses foursquare to let people online know where political meetings he attends are about happen.

As people on social networking sites interact, word-of-mouth spreads to a wider circle of friends, so it has great potential for politicians.

"I have reached more people than I probably would have without social media," Rose said.

Social networks are not just for finding fans for politicians. They also help constituents communicate with their representatives. Rose said he gets as much feedback from social media as he does from emails and phone calls.

County Commissioner Tom Manning, who has also served on the local school board, keeps his two online identities separate.

"I use a personal Facebook page and also a political one. The political page was extremely beneficial during my campaign for county commissioner," he said.

For many politicians, friends, fans, and followers may mean votes in the next election, but for others, like Weiner, it can be political suicide.

"I check both (pages) to ensure that there are no unwanted or undesirable posts," Manning added.

For Mary Erwin, also a member of the Alamance-Burlington Board of Education, Facebook is homework.

"I started it because the North Carolina School Boards Association said it would be a good idea, but I waste a lot of time that I don't have when I get on," she said.

State Sen. Rick Gunn, R-Alamance, made clear through a representative that he "doesn't use Twitter or Facebook to communicate privately with people, nor does he take explicit pictures of himself and share them via these outlets."

That's good advice, but comes too late for Weiner.