I’m honored to be here tonight, and I will confess to you that I am also humbled. You’ve asked me, as a so-called expert, to talk with you about the common good and how well we are doing in protecting and promoting it. Yes, I’ve served in the legislature. Yes, I’ve helped develop national policies. But I am humbled because the real work of the public sector, the real spirit of democracy lives right here in the people in this room. The government is us, all of us, and its real strength comes from citizens like you.

I see Greg Jeffords at the back of the room. Fifteen years ago Greg saw an old dilapidated cotton mill in an economically depressed part of the city. He worked closely with a group of citizens committed to turning that neighborhood around. They applied for and got economic development grants from state government to restore that cotton mill and turn it into a mixed use development. It now houses a Children’s Museum, a bookstore, a number of restaurants and retailers plus 50 apartments. Most important, this effort sparked a revitalization of an entire community. Citizens, working together with government and business, made a huge difference.

Mary Stevens is here. She’s the principal of George Washington Middle School. Five years ago teachers at GWMS joined with parents to improve nutrition at the school. They got sodas and unhealthy snacks removed from vending machines, brought in healthy options and even contracted with a local farmer to provide fresh, locally grown food. The nutritional value of school lunches improved dramatically and resulted in a student body that is healthier physically and mentally. Interestingly, school counselors report fewer behavioral problems as well. In fact, the program was so successful that it has inspired the school board to take similar steps statewide. Parents and teachers, working together with the school district, are improving kid’s lives.
I could go on and on, but my point is that you, the civic leaders in this room, are the heart of American Government. It is easy to open the daily newspaper and think of government as something that happens in a distant capital somewhere. But it is right here, with us.

The main advantages that make America so successful come from the Public Structures that we have all worked together to develop. The Public Structures America has created include physical structures we need in order to get things done – like highways, airports, and communications grids – as well as the organizational structures we need, like a postal system for delivering mail and courts for settling business disagreements. Developing countries have many smart, hard-working individuals, but they don’t have the Public Structures that are essential for overall success. Every person in this room not only benefits from Public Structures, but you are helping to build and support them as well so that we can pass them on to another generation of citizens and innovators.

In our joint work to sustain these structures, we are facing a serious problem. I don’t think I have to convince you that many Americans have become dispirited about citizenship. I’m sure you have all faced a number of cynics as you fought for economic development or changes in state policies. I’m sure we’ve all heard the complaint that “one person can’t accomplish anything.”

What happens when cynicism takes hold? Fewer people vote, power becomes concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, and special interests take precedence over common interests. We see it today in the concerted effort to cut government funding and eliminate government programs. The flooding of New Orleans was a man-made disaster, not a natural one. Years of cutting maintenance budgets and a failure to strengthen the levees caused the levee breaks. The hurricane simply provided the impetus. Was it just a coincidence that the recent mine collapse occurred at a mine with over 200 safety violations? Most businesses are run well and honestly, but we need government to protect us from the businesses that act recklessly and without regard for public safety. These protections will fade away without constant diligence. Jack Abramoff and others like him are an example of what happens when the special interests gain more power than the common interests. We need an engaged, active citizenry to strengthen democratic government to act on behalf of the common good.

I believe the solution to many of the problems we face today is to support and strengthen the backbone of the public sector, and that means expanding the ranks of people who take seriously our collective work of promoting and protecting the common good. As Lee Iacocca wisely said, “You can do the work of two people, but you can’t be two people. Instead, you have to inspire the next guy down the line and get him to inspire his people.” So how do we inspire the next guy down the line, and the next, and the next?
One place to start is with our children. I’m sure the students at GWMS learned a wonderful lesson in citizenship when they saw their parents and teachers work together to change school nutrition policy. We need to bring civics education back into our school system so that children can learn about citizenship in school and have a chance to practice citizenship through service learning requirements.

We can also work with our local newspapers to cover government in a new way. Instead of personality profiles and partisan bickering, let’s convince newspaper editors that we want real substance. This could engage large members of the public who are currently disconnected from government.

We can hold more meetings like this and invite our friends and neighbors, so they see first-hand how people are working together every day to maintain, improve and pass on the viable public structures that advance our quality of life.

Aristotle said, “Men acquire a particular quality by constantly acting a particular way...you become just by performing just actions, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave actions.” Well, I believe that people become good citizens through civic actions. I would ask us all to create opportunities for our friends and neighbors to “do citizenship” with us. In this way, we can improve our government and our quality of life, together.

Thank you.