

Planning for the future

John Oberholser

Salisbury Township,

Lancaster County

29 years of service

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

John Oberholser knows a thing or two about taking actions in the present in anticipation of the future. For example, as an industrial arts teacher for three decades, he taught his students lessons that would hopefully shape them into successful adults.

Likewise, as a nearly 30-year supervisor for Salisbury Township in Lancaster County, Oberholser has worked with his fellow officials to put plans in place now that will shape the community into what its residents want it to be in the future.

“We involve our people as much as possible in how they are governed,” he says. “We have a lot of Amish people in the township, and we meet with their bishops about what they want their community to look like in the future. Our ongoing task is to make sure our zoning is what the people want.”

That long-term vision proved to be just what the township needed in the early 1970s when the supervisors first implemented zoning.

“We’ve had a lot of pressure from our eastern border for growth,” Oberholser says. “Fortunately, the township established good zoning in 1972, and as a result, we have been able to keep the rural nature of the township. We have some growth, but it’s controlled.”

In fact, most of the township’s roughly 40 square miles are agricultural, with growth concentrated mainly around the Village of Gap. The few residential developments that dot the landscape among the farms were built before the township adopted zoning, Oberholser says.

A unique perspective

Although the longtime supervisor did not get involved in township government until a few years after zoning entered the picture, he did serve on the zoning hearing board for six years before becoming an elected official. And that was after several years as an auditor.

“I had always had an interest in government, so it was a natural transition to public office,” he says. Oberholser spent 27 of the last 30 years as chairman of the board of supervisors, turning over the reins to the vice chairman last year.

The former teacher also served as the board’s liaison to the planning commission for many years. That experience, coupled with his time on the zoning hearing board, gives Oberholser a unique perspective on the township’s future, fellow supervisor and PSATS First Vice President Les Houck says.

“He is always looking ahead, not just at what’s going on today,” he says. “Plus, he’s a detail person. As an educator, he’s a very good researcher and makes sure we’re doing everything correctly when we do anything, from drafting ordinances to writing newsletters.”

Operating as a team

Fiscal conservatism has been another hallmark of the board of supervisors’ long-range planning, Oberholser says.

“We’ve been very fiscally responsible,” he says. “We have not had to increase our taxes even though we have a successful road maintenance program and installed a sewer system in the Gap area years ago. In fact, we have not had to raise the sewer rate since we installed the system in the 1980s.”

Oberholser is quick to credit the supervisors as a group for such successes.

“We have always operated as a team,” he says. “All the accomplishments must be attributed to the entire board, not just one person.”

The supervisors’ mutual respect and ease of working together go a long way toward making that teamwork possible, he says.

“We’ve been blessed with the gift of getting along with each other,” Oberholser says. “We’ve always had the idea that if we have a difference of opinion, we meet it head on, get on with it, and don’t take anything personally.”

“There have always been great relationships among all the supervisors and staff,” Houck says. “We don’t always agree, but we know where each is coming from and have never had real contention among us.”

Houck points out that he and Oberholser, along with fellow supervisor Sam Esh, have nearly 100 years of combined service. If you count each man's time on various boards and commissions before being elected, it is well over a century of local government experience.

That will soon come to an end, however, when Oberholser steps down in December after six terms. Houck doesn't plan to let him go far.

"I hate to see him go," he says. "I'll still contact him for help. He's been a really good guy to work with, and I feel blessed that he was here during my time."

Oberholser, for his part, says it's time to let someone else step up to the plate. He'll look back fondly on his time as a supervisor, though.

"I like helping people and having that long-term vision for the township," he says. "We've tried to anticipate residents' needs and learn what they want the township to look like in the future. It's a pleasure being able to look back and see what we've accomplished and how we've helped the township grow in a positive way."