

## **Rooted in public service**

**James Bechdel Sr.**

**Bald Eagle Township, Clinton County**

**27 years of service**

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Some township officials actively pursue public service while others almost fall into it accidentally. Then there are those who you might say are rooted in local government.

James Bechdel Sr., a supervisor for Bald Eagle Township in Clinton County, learned at an early age what it meant to serve his community as he watched his father help govern the township.

A young James helped plow snow and hand-shovel roads that couldn't be cleared with the John Deere tractor and V-plow his father used in those days. Years after his dad's tenure, when neighbors encouraged Bechdel to run for supervisor, it seemed like the natural thing to do.

A little over a year ago, his brother joined him on the board of supervisors. Heck, even the township building sits on land that was once part of the Bechdel family farm.

Of course, Bechdel deals with things his father probably never dreamed of.

"A supervisor has a lot more to do today than just take care of the roads," he says. "There are so many people you have to learn to work with, dealing with businesses

coming into the township, expanding sewer lines now and then, and just explaining to the public why a new ordinance has to be passed.”

No matter what the issue, Bechdel faces it head on, fellow supervisor Chris Dwyer says.

“James is the type of person who likes to get things done, with no fooling around,” he says. “If there’s some kind of emergency, I get the call and then I call James. He’s Johnny-on-the-spot, ready to act, no matter the time of day or night.”

Nonemergency issues get equal attention from the longtime supervisor, township secretary Michelle Walizer says.

“He’s truly a supervisor for the people,” she says. “He’s always right on it if someone has a complaint or problem.”

Dwyer agrees, noting that if a resident calls with a problem that Bechdel can address within the guidelines of the Second Class Township Code, he’ll do whatever he can to resolve the issue.

“I try to treat everyone decently,” Bechdel says. “If someone calls with a concern, I visit and talk to them and try to figure out what we can do. I respond to people; I don’t just hang up and forget about it.”

### **‘Keen knowledge’**

In an interesting twist, all three of the township supervisors carry the title of roadmaster.

“That way, we all have the authority to make decisions quickly without having to try to track down a single person,” Dwyer says.

Not that any one of the three works in a vacuum, he explains. Each keeps the others apprised of anything that comes up and solicits their input before making any major decisions.

Although all three are roadmasters, Dwyer is quick to credit Bechdel for the good condition of the township's roads.

"He has a keen knowledge of what should be done to a road," he says. "He's also good mechanically."

In fact, Bechdel's mechanical ability is apparent in front of the township building, where an antique grader he found and helped restore sits proudly on display, Walizer says.

In his own way, Bechdel is progressive, Dwyer says, pointing to his colleague's involvement in the development of the township's successful business district.

### **Learning from others**

When he was young, Bechdel learned how to deal with people by watching his supervisor-father. Now he learns directly from the people he serves.

"When businesses come in, we learn from the contractors and they learn from us," he says. "We learn from the public, too — how to do our jobs better and improve the township."

After nearly three decades on the board of supervisors, Bechdel isn't ready to hang up his hat just yet.

"I like working with the people," he says. "When my term is up in 2013, I'll probably run again as long as my health is good and the people still want me."

Chances are, he'll still be sitting on that board come 2014. After all, he's rooted in local government.