

Planting the Seeds and Watching Them Grow

Richard Hummel

South Heidelberg Township,

Berks County

35 years of service

BY JILL ERCOLINO / MANAGING EDITOR

It's only fitting that Richard Hummel, a supervisor for South Heidelberg Township in Berks County, spent most of his career in greenhouses because he certainly has a knack for planting seeds and watching them grow.

Just ask township manager Ron Seaman, who says Hummel's talent for making things happen not only helped the supervisor's floral business flourish but also brought change — good change — to the township in the form of projects that improved infrastructure, public safety, and traffic congestion.

Over the years, Seaman says, this active church and community volunteer has built a reputation for being a good listener, a good thinker, and a good person.

“Dick is a real prince of an individual — he's just a very, very good person,” the manager says. “He always has a smile on his face and knows how to get things done and work with people.”

Young blood and new ideas

Hummel and his wife of 50 years, Helen, put down roots in South Heidelberg Township a few decades ago because they wanted to live in a nice place where they could raise their three sons.

And although the local businessman never had political aspirations, he agreed to run for township supervisor in the 1970s. A friend, who happened to be on the board, encouraged him to get involved. “He told me they needed some young people on the board and some new ideas,” Hummel says.

And that’s exactly what they got when Hummel, who was in his 30s at the time, was elected. Since then, the supervisor has focused his energies on making South Heidelberg Township a better place to live and work.

Early on, for instance, Hummel and his fellow supervisors strongly supported the development of a public sewer system in the township. Residents, however, weren’t as enthusiastic.

“We stuck to our guns, though,” he says, “and eventually people came around after they saw that the sewer brought businesses here and increased their property values.”

Hummel was also a driving force behind the township’s eight-acre park, where the young and young at heart gather year-round. In the summer, they enjoy the playground equipment, and in the winter, they get their exercise at the outdoor ice skating rink — the first in the area.

“That was a pet project of mine,” Hummel says proudly.

A firm believer in partnerships, the supervisor has achieved some of his greatest accomplishments through the sheer power of cooperation.

For instance, Seaman says, Hummel merely made a suggestion, and within weeks, six municipalities along the Route 422 corridor were working together to untangle the snarled traffic that is common on this stretch of road. With a \$1.4 million grant from the state Department of Transportation, South Heidelberg and its neighbors updated and synchronized 13 traffic signals on the four-mile stretch, making it easier for travelers to get around.

“He sees a problem and makes a recommendation, and things start to happen,” Seaman says.

Hummel also spearheaded the creation of the Western Berks Fire Co., a cooperative effort that consolidated the volunteer fire companies in South Heidelberg and Lower Heidelberg townships and Wernersville and Sinking Spring boroughs.

To support the venture, each municipality has implemented a fire tax, which means that the new fire commissioner and his team of volunteers can shift their focus from fundraising to improving public safety and recruiting new members.

“That’s the way it should be: no more hoagie sales, no more chicken barbecues,” Hummel says. “Now, instead of having four struggling fire companies, we have one robust one.”

More projects to nurture

Hummel, 75, has one more year to go in his current term and says he will likely run for office again. Why? Because even after more than three decades as a township supervisor, he still has more seeds to plant and more projects to nurture.

And as Hummel goes about the business of public service, he will be guided by the same values that have served him since he was first elected: “Don’t ever run for public office for a personal vendetta.

“Run because you want a better community,” he says, “and serve because you want what’s good for all.”