

## **‘It’s all about the community’**

**Donna Mindek**

**Harborcreek Township, Erie County**

**24 years of service**

BY JENNIFER L. HAWBAKER / ASSISTANT EDITOR

Harborcreek Township means everything to Donna Mindek. She moved there as a child, still gets together with her high school friends every month, and spent 24 years working as a supervisor to create a sense of community among the residents.

Mindek, a former PSATS president, stepped down from her township posts — supervisor and secretary-treasurer among them — at the end of 2009 after four terms on the board. The time was right, she says, but she looks back on those years with more than a few fond memories.

“I don’t regret any of it,” she says. “I’m pleased the residents gave me the opportunity to be that servant for the township.”

### **Starting out**

When Mindek first decided to run for office, however, success was anything but certain. She was working in the township building for the tax collector and thought she might make a bid for auditor. At the urging of those around her, though, she took an even bigger step and found herself the first female supervisor candidate in the township.

“It was difficult,” Mindek says. “It was a diverse community, but it also was a lot of farmland. For a female to run in a farm community — I was not sure how it would happen.”

Turns out, she *made* it happen.

“I went door to door, talking to people,” Mindek says. “A few looked at me and said that I didn’t know how to drive a snow plow [implying that was the only qualification], but I was pretty well-received.”

Almost before she knew it, Mindek was no longer the first female candidate. She was now the first female supervisor in Harborcreek Township. Fortunately, that distinction didn’t seem to matter to the other board members.

“They were supportive of the election, and they were anxious for change as well,” Mindek says.

Still, those first years were about getting the roads plowed more than anything else, she remembers. Mindek donned the hat of road superintendent and learned how to do road and bridge inspections. And she freely admits that some of those residents were right: Her place was not on a snow plow.

“I went out once,” she laughs, “not that I wanted to.”

Instead, Mindek took care of all the paperwork and handled the finances. Before long, her role as supervisor took on a specific focus: fostering growth and development and doing her best to bring the community together. Residents soon learned that Mindek wasn’t just there to provide the ideas, though. She was there to do the hands-on work, too.

## **Getting the job done**

“I got a group of seniors together who wanted to have a place to meet and do things,” Mindek says. The township building’s vacant basement provided the perfect space, but it needed some TLC to bring it up to par.

“We were able to buy all the materials, and most of the seniors helped to build it,” she says. “They did everything they could, minus the electric and plumbing. It was my job to get the money, and I even laid tile. It was fun working with them to make that happen.”

It was also one of the first steps toward establishing that sense of community, a journey that continued with a reinvigorated chamber of commerce.

“We wanted to restart the chamber to make us more business-friendly,” Mindek says. A fringe benefit was the fact that the businesses then pulled together to sponsor community events, including a summer festival.

And when she started working with local veterans to build a memorial in the township, the challenges went beyond deciding on design and placement. The biggest was figuring out how to foot the bill.

“I stood outside a Kmart collecting coins,” Mindek remembers.

That’s a good example of how, with anything she takes on, Mindek gives “about 160 percent” of her attention and effort to the task at hand. She kept finding that the residents wanted and needed more, so she had to keep running for office to get it all done.

“Once you’re into something,” she says, “you want to see it through to fruition.”

## **Serving townships statewide**

The same held true when Mindek was elected to the PSATS Executive Board in 1991. She rose through the chairs and was elected president in April 2004 — just a day after she welcomed U.S. President George Bush to the Association’s annual conference.

That statewide service meant a significant time commitment and a lot of road trips between Harrisburg and Erie, but Mindek says it was worth every minute and every mile.

“I think more people should try it because it’s a good opportunity to get to know more about your community by seeing what others have done,” she says. “It also gives you the chance to meet with legislators one on one. They get to know you because they see you more often, and you’ve got that PSATS name behind you.”

Although she likes to focus on the positive aspects of local government service, Mindek admits that it wasn’t always easy.

“It’s frustrating in some cases because you have to make some very unpopular votes,” she says. “It could involve a friend, someone who supported you, and they just don’t understand why you couldn’t vote ‘yes’ for them or their project. You just try to do your best.”

Being a dedicated township official, however, often cut into family time. “It was hard to balance that,” she says, “but you make it work.”

Family is the reason Mindek has become a “snowbird,” heading south for the winter to her home in Florida. Her brother lives there, too, and her son is just a short trip away in Mobile, Ala.

That's a far cry, literally, from the snowy, icy winters in Harborcreek Township. Mindek is glad to finally be getting into the groove of retired life, and she knows the township is in good hands — no matter what the season.

She hopes that future local government leaders will take to heart the words she lived by as a township supervisor. "Be true to yourself and to the people," Mindek says. "The more you can tell your constituents about what's going on, the better."

Because after all, she says, "It's all about the community — seeing that something you've done has made such a positive difference."