

A good neighbor

Clayton Sitlinger

Lykens Township, Dauphin County

45 years of service

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Clayton Sitlinger believes in treating everyone as a neighbor. That's how he deals with his actual neighbors, as well as the residents of Lykens Township in Dauphin County, where he's been a supervisor and roadmaster for more than 45 years.

For Sitlinger, that means talking things out to resolve conflicts and being straightforward when something needs to be corrected.

Case in point: Some young people visiting a neighboring farmer decided to take a joy ride in a golf cart the 89-year-old Sitlinger uses to get around his property. Township secretary Jean Deppen says after the cart was tracked down in the neighbor's cornfield, Sitlinger simply talked to the man, rather than calling the police.

"He told him, 'I wasn't an angel when I was a kid either, but I never stole anything,'" she says. "He said that when kids do these kinds of things, they need to be corrected, and the man assured him the kids would be punished."

The longtime supervisor takes a similar tack with residents and the other supervisors. "I work with people and try to help them as neighbors," Sitlinger says. Even when the supervisors don't agree on an issue, they work together until they reach a consensus. "There are never any hurt feelings," Deppen says.

Just like in the situation with the golf cart, Sitlinger's neighborliness doesn't stop him from speaking plainly when the situation calls for it. "He's one of those guys who, if someone tries to pull something over on the township, he'll tell them the way it is," Deppen says.

Sitlinger's son, Celin, puts it even more succinctly. "If people are willing to listen, he'll work with them," he says, "but if they get contrary, his 'Dutch' will come out."

Resolving conflict

Being a supervisor in a small, rural community like Lykens Township doesn't bring the kinds of headaches common to larger townships with a lot of development, Sitlinger says. In fact, the greatest changes he's seen in the township over four decades have been the increased rules and regulations from the state and the ever-growing amount of paperwork they bring with them, he says.

The most difficult problem the township supervisors have faced is the ongoing struggle to regulate outdoor wood-burning furnaces, Sitlinger says. In the face of opposition, he says the important thing is to "use good judgment and stay cool."

Area farmers use outdoor furnaces, Deppen explains, and conflicts arise when they are placed too close to neighboring homes. People complain about the smoke and odors when materials other than wood are burned in them. The township emergency management coordinator even found one furnace that had wood stacked right up against it — a dangerous fire hazard.

"We're working with the Dauphin County Planning Commission to craft an ordinance to regulate the burners," Deppen says, and it's an issue that is likely to remain

controversial. In fact, the secretary says that a zoning hearing about the furnaces was the first time since joining the township in 1991 that she saw tempers flare at a meeting.

Even when the township adopted zoning some years ago, no one argued against it. “We have been told we have one of the best rural zoning ordinances you can find,” Deppen says. “It leans toward preservation of farmland, which is very important to the residents.”

Going above and beyond

Another neighborly trait is looking out for one another and doing what you can to help others. Sitlinger embodies this principle by going above and beyond what he is required to do, Deppen says.

“In his life, the township is No. 1,” she says. “In 1996, when we had a lot of flooding and there was a lot of cleanup to be done, he never put in for the extra time he spent clearing the roads.

“He’ll get up at 2 a.m. to plow the roads so they’re clear when people are up and moving around,” she adds.

Sitlinger’s son says that when his father was a teenager, he helped his grandfather, also a supervisor, shovel the roads by hand. When Sitlinger took office in 1963 to fill a vacancy, the township was still using a grader pulled by a 1926 McCormick Deering tractor. “They finally got their first motorized grader in 1967 and have bought two more since then,” he says. The longtime supervisor still runs the grader, in addition to the snow plow.

“He’ll put in an eight- to 10-hour shift,” his son says. “His mind is still sharp; it’s younger than his body. Once he gets into the truck, he’s ready to go.”

Another way Sitlinger looks out for the people of his township is by “keeping taxes low and not overspending,” the supervisor says. In his first years in office, the board met in a one-room schoolhouse the township owned. The township got a new building with a three-bay garage in the early 1970s but kept the old schoolhouse to use for storage.

The township also contracts out a lot of work. “The auditors say we’re more efficient that way,” Sitlinger says.

After more than four decades as a supervisor, Sitlinger says he’s going to hang up his hat when his term ends in a year or so. He wants to enjoy time with his daughter, two sons, nine grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren.

In the meantime, he’ll continue plowing snow and working with his fellow supervisors to keep the budget in line. It’s all part of being a good supervisor, he says.

Then again, maybe it’s just being a good neighbor.

PHOTO OUTLINE:

Clayton Sitlinger, a supervisor for Lykens Township, Dauphin County, is devoted to his community. “In his life, the township is No. 1,” a colleague says. “He’ll get up at 2 a.m. to plow the roads so they’re clear when people are up and moving around.”

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