**Note: To download a high-resolution photo of David M. Sanko, log onto www.psats.org and click on “Newsroom.”**

**For more information, contact Digital Communications Manager Jill Ercolino at (717) 763-0930, Ext. 125, or jercolino@psats.org.**

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**Step Up…or Stop Complaining!**

**Your Community Needs You**

**An Op-Ed**

**by David M. Sanko**

Executive Director, Pa. State Association of Township Supervisors

 During this year’s municipal elections, voters will see familiar names when they stand in front of their voting machines…not the names from the nightly news, but rather the names of friends and neighbors who want to serve their community.

 In a robust democracy, this is clearly what the Founding Fathers envisioned for what would become the United States of America as battles raged and lives were lost, all for the sake of independence.

 Back then, the nation’s earliest settlers wanted to make decisions about their lives and communities freely without some king in a distant place interfering.

 Their sacrifices gave birth to democracy and our deeply rooted right to self-government, where we the people take an active role in public decision-making. This right lives on in Pennsylvania’s local governments. William Penn brought the concept of township, borough, and county government to the new world more than 300 years ago – and it still works. Then and now, local government truly is the government closest to the people and has the most direct impact on our daily lives.

 Unfortunately, in some places, democracy and self-government are being taken for granted. Apathy is on the rise.

 Some people aren’t interested in voting and even less are interested in holding office. And it’s not just adults. Time magazine reports that when 4,000-plus high school and college students – tomorrow’s leaders, mind you – were asked if they would ever be interested in running for political office, 89 percent of them said “no.”

 Much of this may be attributed to negative perceptions about gridlock and harsh partisan divisiveness, but those things simply don’t happen in most local governments.

 In fact, many incumbents don’t face opposition in local elections because they’re doing a great job: maintaining affordable taxes, keeping roads open in the winter, providing public safety, and building parks and trails. In this case, voters likely figure, why fix something that isn’t broken? Incumbents also have conquered the local government learning curve and bring experience and knowledge to the table that’s hard to match – and beat.

 That said, some municipalities struggle to fill vacancies, whether it’s finding candidates for service and recruiting firefighters or lining up volunteers for the local community day: Residents are busy juggling hectic lives. And what time they do have is being funneled into work, their kids’ after-school activities and sports, and other interests.

 Could our Founding Fathers have predicted this way of life at a time when there were no cars or smart phones? No, but do today’s circumstances justify our collective apathy? I don’t think so.

 Let’s face it, we all make time for the things that we care about. Shouldn’t that carefully curated list include the community that we’ve chosen to call home and raise our kids and grandkids?

 It’s time to take an active role.

 Consider volunteering, for instance. Many municipalities have advisory groups, including planning commissions and recreation boards. Volunteer fire and ambulance companies could use help, too. Find something that interests you, get involved, offer your opinions, and support your community and elected leaders. You’ll learn a lot and gain a true appreciation of what it takes to manage a municipality.

 You might even consider running for office yourself.

 Local government is populated with people just like you – people who never thought they’d be a public official. Some were asked to run. Others were motivated by the desire to help. Either way, they got involved, and many continue to serve their communities.

 With municipal elections happening in 2019, there’s no better time to toss your hat into the ring, but you need to get moving. Candidates can begin circulating and filing their nomination petitions between February 19 and March 12. The staff at the county elections office can explain the process and paper work.

 Throughout history, Americans have given their lives to protect our freedoms and democracy. At the very least, the rest of us can spare our time and talents to serve our communities and to ensure, as Abraham Lincoln so eloquently said, “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

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***About the author:*** David M. Sanko is the executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. With a broad background in local and state government, Sanko oversees an organization that is the primary advocate for the commonwealth’s 1,454 townships of the second class, home to 5.5 million Pennsylvanians.