

SUPERVISOR

HALLOFFAME

A valued township supervisor for three and a half decades, **Richard Peffer**, who is leaving office at the end of the year, is known as a straight shooter and an unwavering, reliable voice for the people of his community.

Like a Rock

Richard Peffer
 Middle Paxton Township,
 Dauphin County
 36 years of service

BY AMY BOBB /
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Middle Paxton Township in Dauphin County may be a quiet, rural community of less than 5,000 people, but it has had its share of controversies, from lawsuits with developers to sewage fights with the state Department of Environmental Protection and battles to stop construction of a landfill and a hydroelectric dam. Through it all, Richard Peffer has been a steady, reassuring presence guiding the township to victory and success.

“There have been some stressful times through the years, and Dick has been here through them all,” manager Julie Ann Seeds says.

“He’s been well-tested through some controversial issues, and he has remained strong,” says Jeffery Smith, chair of the board. “We have always come out on top, and that tells me that we have done the right thing.”

No matter what the issue, the community could depend on Peffer to stand up for the residents and fight for what is right.

“He’s like a rock in the township,” roadmaster Bob Hofer says. “He has a



Richard Peffer, long-time supervisor for Middle Paxton Township, is known for being accessible to residents. He likes to drive around the township to talk to people and always seeks out both sides of a story. After 36 years of service, he is retiring this month.

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Fair and equal treatment

Peffer’s roots run deep in Middle Paxton. His parents and grandparents were

raised in the township, and three of his four children still live there. It only makes sense that he would want to give back to a community that provides the rural lifestyle he and his family prefer.

“I like it out in the open,” says Peffer, who turns 87 this month. “I like the fresh air and sunshine. I couldn’t live in the city.”

Middle Paxton, which celebrated its 230th anniversary this year, was founded on agriculture and industries, including brick making, lumber, and ice, that long ago disappeared. In more recent decades, the township has become a bedroom community for residents who commute to neighboring municipalities, including Harrisburg, for work. The rural township also offers citizens and visitors alike access to several recreational trails at local and county parks and on state and federal lands.

Peffer, who is winding up his career as a township supervisor this month, first ran for the office in 1981 soon after he stopped by the township office to find out what permits were needed for a house his daughter’s family was building. He didn’t appreciate the vague answers he got.

“I decided to run for supervisor to help straighten things out,” he says.

“He’s like a rock in the township. He has a lot of common sense and can always be counted on.”

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“I thought there needed to be a fair process in place for everyone so that no one could play favorites.”

In the 36 years since then, the township has been increasingly hit with unfunded state and federal mandates, such as building code and stormwater management requirements. Local government, he says, has become more complex and regulated.

“When I first started, the supervisors could do what needed to be done with few problems,” he says. “Now it’s become more complicated, and we often have to get our engineer involved in projects.”

Through it all, Pepper maintains the same philosophy of putting the needs of the residents first and treating everyone equally and fairly.

“I try to work with the people and do what I can to help them out while making sure everyone follows the rules,” he says.

A hard-working man who spent the bulk of his career as an ironworker (*he briefly left his hometown for a few years when he was young to build highways in Alaska*), Pepper also tries to stretch tax dollars as far as possible.

“He’s always been the frugal one,” Seeds says. “When other supervisors over the years wanted to buy or spend, he would bring us down to reality. He really thinks about the budget and worries about where the township is headed.”

Upstanding and dependable

During his years of service, those who have worked with Pepper the longest have come to appreciate his wisdom and experience, as well as his straightforward approach to township business.

“He gets along with everyone, yet he’s not afraid to ask the difficult questions and do what is right,” Smith says.

As a township supervisor himself for 16 years, Smith says, “I consider it a privilege to serve on the board alongside Dick Pepper and gain from his knowledge of the township. I also sat in the audience through the years and listened to

him. The township is 150 percent a better place because of Dick Pepper, and we are going to miss him tremendously.”

Roadmaster Hofer has been with the township for 29 years, working hand in hand with Pepper on various projects. In his role as liaison to the public works department, Pepper meets regularly with Hofer and the crew to offer direction and guidance, whether it’s for maintaining the township’s 36 miles of roads or converting a two-room schoolhouse into a popular community building.

“He’s hands-on and not afraid to get dirty,” Hofer says. “He’s always been a go-getter, and even as he has aged, he is very resilient and doesn’t shy away from work.”

One of the life lessons Hofer will take away from his time with Pepper is how to relate to people.

“He taught me to treat people how I would want to be treated,” he says. “He listens to them, yet he doesn’t waver in his beliefs and sticks up for what he thinks is right. He’s an upstanding, no-nonsense, dependable guy, and people appreciate that.”

His straight-shooter philosophy resonates with residents who have continued to re-elect him to office without Pepper ever spending a dime or one minute on campaigning.

“He never had to put out a sign announcing his re-election,” Seeds says. “He never went to the polls or sent let-

ters to residents asking for their vote. People just knew him and re-elected him every six years.”

In the 15 years since Seeds came to work for the township, initially as a zoning officer and building code inspector before becoming manager in 2009, Pepper has been an invaluable mentor. After she lost her father two years ago, he became a kind of surrogate dad, too.

“He has a lot of compassion for people,” she says, noting that she can count on him to always have her back. “Six years ago, he was thinking of not running for supervisor, but I begged him to and he hesitantly agreed.”

Now after 36 years as a supervisor, he is ready to hang up his public official’s hat. He plans to use the extra hours to garden, visit his hunting camps in Cameron and Tioga counties, and devote time to his other roles as father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

“He wants to ride off into the sunset and spend time with his family,” Seeds says.

Even as he fades out his day-to-day presence on behalf of the township, his wish for the community remains unchanged.

“I don’t want the township to become built up,” he says. “I hope it will always keep its open space and rural feel.” ♦

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How PSATS has helped this Hall of Famer

In Richard Pepper’s early years as a Middle Paxton Township supervisor, the PSATS Annual Educational Conference gave him access to valuable information on a wide variety of topics in a short time.

Now that his time with the township is winding down, he continues to encourage staff and supervisors to take advantage of the many resources available through the State Association.

“The board will direct me to PSATS for policies, manuals, job descriptions, and sample ordinances,” manager Julie Seeds says. “Dick and the rest of the board are also very supportive of continuing our education by attending workshops and webinars.”