**Keeping the community spirit**

**Neal Davis**

**Polk Township, Jefferson County**

**28 years of service**

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

When Neal Davis first became a supervisor for Polk Township in Jefferson County in 1977, the polling place was a local market.

“A farmer told me he would sell the township two acres of land if we would build a place to hold elections,” Davis recalls. The township did better than that. It built a municipal office, where residents could come to vote, as well as a garage, antiskid shed, and fuel tank storage building.

Previously, the township equipment, such as it was, had been stored at Davis’s house. “We had a little John Deere tractor with a loader bucket and a snow plow for winter, an old Ford truck that sometimes ran but more often did not, and an old horse-drawn grader that we pulled with the tractor,” he says.

How things have changed. The township now has three trucks, a grader, a fairly new John Deere tractor, a large snow blower purchased from PennDOT, and more. Oh, and one more thing: That local market has been replaced by Davis’s own business, the Dixon Corner Country Store.

**An ‘old-school’ supervisor**

Davis initially filled a vacancy for two years and then served four six-year terms. He left office in 2004 but was persuaded to run again in 2009 to fill another vacancy.

There is something to be said for being a municipal official for 28 years. Not only do you get to see the township grow, you learn a lot and make many contacts along the way.

“Neal is a great guy to work with because he has so much experience,” says James Manno, a relatively new supervisor. He, Davis, and the third supervisor, John Lee, were all elected two years ago to fill a full term and two partial terms. Manno was re-elected last fall for his first six-year term.

“Neal knows a heck of a lot of people at the county level and at PSATS,” Manno says. “I’m the new kid on the block. I’m sort of the technology guy, so I set up the website and handle computer stuff. We rely on Neal to know how the township works. He’s the old-school guy, but he knows just who to contact.”

Not that Davis hasn’t kept up with the times. When he started, the main focus was maintaining the roads, he says.

“Now we have a comprehensive plan and a planning commission, plus we have all the state and federal mandates, such as the building code,” he says. “It used to be, if you wanted to build something, you basically just built it.”

Some residents don’t like the building code. One man who decided to remodel an old school to use as a warehouse wasn’t very happy when he found out he had to get building permits and inspections, Davis says.

The supervisor has also been instrumental in arranging agreements with neighboring municipalities to share mowing and plowing and craft a joint comprehensive plan. He also helped develop the Jefferson County Council of Governments and a countywide sewage association.

**The go-to guy**

Aside from the building code, the township doesn’t get many complaints from residents, Davis says. Even with natural gas drillers making inroads into the township to tap into the Marcellus Shale, there hasn’t been much concern on the part of residents.

“Most are excited about the drilling,” he says. “A few are worried about the water because most of us are on wells, but the larger concern is about a major spill or something like that. Still, no one seems too worried about the fracking process.”

Manno says Davis is not only the go-to guy for the other supervisors but also for the gas drillers. If they have a question, they go to Davis.

“So far, the gas companies have been good to work with,” Davis says. “As roadmaster, I talk to them about any problems and they’ve been good about fixing them.”

Davis’s longevity at the township also makes him the one residents turn to when there’s something that needs to be addressed.

“The township is so small, and everyone knows each other so they’ll call me at home or call the office and let us know there’s a problem,” he says. “Usually, if someone calls, then something is wrong, like trees are down from a storm.”

Davis says he’s learned a lot by listening to the residents over the years. “The majority of the time, a guy who lives on a road can tell you more about that road than you could learn in a lifetime,” he says.

**Handing over the reins**

The biggest problem in a township with an aging population of 265 is getting younger people to step up and get involved in local government, Davis says. When the *News* went to press, the township had a planning commission with no members and was searching for a third auditor.

Davis agreed to run for supervisor three decades ago because the elderly supervisors in office could not do the job anymore. “Everything had been let go, the roads weren’t being maintained,” he says.

Now, Davis says he’s getting to be the “old” supervisor and would like to find someone younger to take over when his term ends in 2014. The 67-year-old would like to travel with his wife and enjoy some leisure time.

Still, if no one steps up to the plate, he may pursue another term. “I’ve seen the township grow, seen people work together,” he says. “I want to see it keep growing, but the interest in the community seems to be dying off. We need to keep that community spirit going.”