**Big shoes to fill**

**Tom Shaffer**

**Upper Paxton Township, Dauphin County**

**30 years of service**

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Tom Shaffer has left big shoes to fill. When he retired from the board of supervisors of Upper Paxton Township, Dauphin County, in December, the 30-year veteran left behind a board composed of three men with a little over a dozen years of experience — combined.

“He will be greatly missed on the board,” says chairman Ron Hepner, who has completed four years of his first term. “His knowledge sure came in handy when people came in with different issues. He kind of surprised me in my second year when he told me I was ready to take over as chairman.”

Shaffer acknowledges that he encouraged Hepner to take on the chairman role so that it would be a smooth transition when Shaffer retired at the end of his term. He also encouraged John Orr, whom he had known in his role as a manager for the Dauphin County Conservation District, to run for the seat that Shaffer would be vacating.

“He is probably the most knowledgeable about stormwater and related things in the township,” Shaffer says. “I got a very good replacement.”

As for Orr, he says it’s impossible to replace Shaffer. “I’m not trying to fill his shoes; I’m just trying to uphold the standards he set.”

**‘Something to keep me busy’**

Shaffer entered public service upon retiring from Bell Telephone in 1980 after years as a construction foreman. His father had been a township supervisor, and Shaffer always had an interest in road work.

“I knew one of the supervisors wasn’t going to run the following year, so I decided to run,” he says. The other supervisor died before his term ended, however, so the board appointed Shaffer to fill the vacancy, and there he remained for the next three decades.

“I was retired and had nothing pressing and needed something to keep me busy,” he says. “And it sure did.”

Shaffer served as chairman for 26 years until he talked Hepner into taking over two years ago. He also indulged his interest in road work by helping with the roads in his early years as supervisor and even climbed behind the wheel of a snow plow when needed.

“I kind of enjoyed that,” he says. “Then, about five years ago, I went blind in one eye and they decided that a one-eyed plow operator was not a good thing.”

Hepner is beginning to realize that Shaffer’s hands-on approach set a precedent. “He was willing to get involved,” he says. “He didn’t just show up at meetings; he’d get out there and do things. Now that I’m retired, more of the responsibility is falling on me.”

**Meeting challenges head-on**

Upper Paxton Township remains a fairly rural township thanks to Shaffer’s and the board’s efforts to adopt zoning in the early 1990s.

“That set the trend for us as far as growth,” Shaffer says. “We don’t have a lot of growth, but when we do, we have it where we want it. We were able to save a couple farms that would have gone by the wayside otherwise.”

Township residents also benefited from the board’s decision six years ago to eliminate the property tax.

“The school tax had gone up, and the county tax had gone up,” Shaffer says. “The supervisors decided the people needed a little break. We took a look at the budget and decided we could tighten things a bit.”

Shaffer’s desire to do right by the township’s residents allowed him to fight the tough battles that needed to be fought, his colleagues say.

“Tom has principles that he believes in and because of that, he was able to enact zoning, which was needed here,” Orr says. “That was a difficult time in our township, but Tom never wavered when there were challenges.”

Shaffer also went head-to-head with Waste Management in the late 1980s to try to close a landfill and eliminate the truck traffic that was putting wear and tear on township roads. The company actually sued the township and supervisors for $90 million, claiming its ordinances restricting the landfill were invalid.

“It took about a year to sort that out,” he says. “It was a tense several months. It sort of puts the fear of God into you when you’re eating breakfast and you get a call from a reporter asking how you feel about getting sued and that’s the first you’ve heard about it. That kind of puts a sour note on the day.”

The landfill was eventually closed when it reached capacity, but the tipping fees the township received while it was open amounted to a nice chunk of change.

“One legacy Tom leaves behind is that the board put that money aside — about $800,000 — for dire emergencies,” Hepner says. “While a neighboring municipality used its fees to build a new municipal building and buy new equipment, we have that money available if we need it.”

**‘He will be greatly missed’**

Like anyone who makes decisions that affect people’s lives, Shaffer had his share of detractors over the years. Overall, however, he says he had few problems with residents and that listening went a long way toward smoothing ruffled feathers.

“The first thing is to listen to what they say and if you can, give an answer right away,” he says. “Tell them how the township plans to address the situation. If you don’t have an answer right then, tell them you’ll bring it up at the board meeting and ask them to be there.”

The most important thing is to make sure you get back to residents with an answer, Shaffer says, even if it’s one they don’t want to hear.

Serving the township for as many years as Shaffer did provided an advantage when dealing with residents, he says. “After you’re there for a while, you know which complaints to take seriously and which to take with a grain of salt,” he says. “Some people can complain about the daylight. With others, you know if they comment, there’s a problem.”

That ability to listen, coupled with the drive to do what was best for the township, made Shaffer an effective leader, Hepner says.

“I have a lot of respect for Tom because he really tried to do what he thought was best for the people in the township,” Orr says. “He wasn’t in it for any self-glory, that’s for sure.”

As for Shaffer, he says what he enjoyed most about his time as a supervisor was being able to help mold what the township would be like in the future while not neglecting the lessons of the past.

“I’ve always said that you should spend 70 percent of the time looking at the future, 20 percent looking at the present, and 10 percent looking at the past and seeing what you’ve done wrong so you don’t do it again,” he says.

What does Shaffer’s personal future hold? Spending time with Ruth Ann, his wife of 51 years, who supported his public service but agreed that after 30 years, it was time to step down. They live on a small farm, where “there is always something to do,” he says.

It will likely hold a few hunting trips, too, to add to the 45 he’s made out West over the past five decades.

As for the board of supervisors, knowing Shaffer is just a phone call away provides some comfort, Hepner says.

“I learned from going to training that you can’t know everything but you can find out where to go to get the answers,” he says. “Tom is a tremendous resource, and his knowledge is going to be greatly missed on the board.”