

SUPERVISOR

HALLOFFAME

Over four decades as a supervisor for South Union Township, **Robert Schiffbauer** has devoted himself to enhancing the community’s recreational amenities to improve residents’ quality of life.

A Life of Public Service

Robert Schiffbauer
 South Union Township,
 Fayette County
 40 years of service

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSISTANT EDITOR

During his travels before becoming a township supervisor four decades ago, Robert Schiffbauer was struck by the emphasis some communities placed on recreation and how that focus improved the quality of life for their citizens. Not seeing that same enthusiasm in his own township, Schiffbauer made it his mission to improve the recreational opportunities in South Union Township once he joined the board. As a result, the municipality now boasts one of the best recreation programs in southwestern Pennsylvania.

“In 1980, we constructed the first indoor, stand-alone sports facility by a township of the second class,” he says. “It’s still highly functional, but we want to build a larger sports complex to offer more activities. The new complex will include a permanent indoor artificial turf surface that we won’t have to take



up during basketball season, as we do in the sports facility we have now.”

That dream is on its way to fruition with the purchase last year of an old warehouse that the township will convert into the sports complex, he says.

Schiffbauer has also been credited with the township’s completion of its portion of the Sheepskin Trail, a 34-mile path to connect the Great Allegheny Passage to the north with West Virginia’s Mon River Rail-Trail to the south. The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources designated Schiffbauer a “Good-Natured

Robert Schiffbauer followed in his grandfather’s and father’s footsteps to become a township supervisor 40 years ago. Among his many accomplishments in South Union Township, he is most proud of helping to build one of the best recreation programs in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvanian” because of his efforts to make the trail a reality.

While a good portion of the trail is constructed on an old railroad right of way, some is made up of natural surfaces, which posed their own challenges. For example, the trail had to cross a stream leading into the township park. With money tight, Schiffbauer reached out to the PennDOT district office to ask about a pedestrian bridge that was being removed as part of a Route 70 interchange upgrade.

Thanks to Schiffbauer’s intervention, the bridge was donated to the township and converted into a wooden covered bridge, which has become a focal point of the trail.

“We completed the trail a few years ago, and the public response has been overwhelming,” he says. “I have never

“Tourism is the biggest economic driver in the county and so **we need to keep working and expanding** in that respect.”

seen that kind of response to a project. We took a lot of time to get it right. Tourism is the biggest economic driver in the county and so we need to keep working and expanding in that respect.”

Improving the quality of life

Unlike many of its neighbors in this once-thriving coal mining and steel manufacturing county, South Union has enjoyed a humming economy thanks to retail growth.

“Back in the 1970s, the supervisors decided to install public sewer throughout the township,” Schiffbauer says. “That led to a lot of residential and commercial growth. In the late ’80s, we had a boom in retail development, which continued until the recession in 2008. The development gave us funds to run the township and do other things that many in the county were not able to do.”

Although the township’s economy has slowed, Schiffbauer and his fellow supervisors are not resting on their laurels. They are building the first dog park in the county near the Sheepskin Trail.

“We are trying to improve the quality of life for those people who are already here,” he says, “and at the same time, hope that it makes our township more inviting to people who move into the area.”

Still, the township does face challenges. The supervisors have an eye on the future if the lack of economic growth continues. Although the supervisors have not raised real estate taxes in the 40 years that Schiffbauer has been in office, property owners continue to seek tax breaks, which often come with reassessments.

“Not only are we not growing, but our tax revenue is also decreasing,” he says.

The township also has an aging sewer system, which it tries to upgrade as it can, and the rising cost of asphalt has meant paving fewer roads and using more chip seal.

‘I love helping people’

Despite the challenges, Schiffbauer clearly loves being a township supervisor. That’s not surprising, really, because he grew up with a father who served as a supervisor for four terms. His grandfather also served a term or two on the



Schiffbauer negotiated with PennDOT for an old pedestrian bridge to forge a stream crossing on the Sheepskin Trail. It was turned into a covered bridge, which has become one of the most popular — and picturesque — features of the trail.

board in North Union Township. Even his mom did her part.

“I never saw anyone better at handling an upset constituent on the phone than my mother,” he says. “My father was a gentle giant and was very active in the community.”

That example of public service led Schiffbauer to work at the Pentagon for 18 months after high school. That was followed by three years in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Vietnam War and then four years at the University of Wisconsin pursuing a degree in political science. He served as an aide to Congressman Austin Murphy for more than three years before finally landing a job as roadmaster for South Union Township.

“I had run for township supervisor and won the primary and general elections,” he says. “In the meantime, the roadmaster position opened up, and the supervisors appointed me to fill that job before I even assumed office.”

After four decades as a supervisor and roadmaster, Schiffbauer says he still enjoys getting up every day and going to work.

“I love helping people. That is more satisfying than anything,” he says. “Townships are the best form of government, hands down. We are able to act on problems expeditiously. In other

forms of government, you never seem to be able to find the right person.

“When we hear about a problem, we jump on it right away if we can,” he adds. “Whatever the problem is for the person who calls the township, it’s a big deal to that person. We try to keep our constituents satisfied.”

Schiffbauer points to the handful of people who attend supervisors meetings as a sign that residents are happy with the job the supervisors are doing. The fact that the supervisors work well together has also contributed to public satisfaction, he believes.

“One of the reasons our township has been so fortunate over the years is because of that good relationship,” he says. “You can’t move forward without working together well.”

Schiffbauer’s current term ends next year, but he says that if his health remains good, he will likely run again. The only concession is that he may take a little more time off to spend with his wife Anh, whom he met when he visited Vietnam in 1999.

“I am devoted full-time to my job,” he says. “I enjoy working with my fellow supervisors, and we have a great group of workers. I have had no higher aspirations; I have been satisfied doing what I’ve been doing for the last 40 years.” ♦

How PSATS has helped this Hall of Famer

Robert Schiffbauer appreciates the guidance he has received over the years from PSATS’ legislative staff.

“If I had a question about a piece of legislation or something that was going on in Harrisburg, I would call Elam [Herr, PSATS’ retired director of legislative affairs],” he says. “He was very accessible. The things that impacted us the most were proposed legislation. We were able to use the information we received to determine what kind of action we should be taking as supervisors.”