

Fair to all

John Diacogiannis

Hanover Township, Northampton County

25 years of service

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

John Diacogiannis approaches challenges in a thorough, thoughtful, and logical manner. That's no surprise, considering that he has worked for PPL Corporation in risk management and insurance for the past 34 years.

He has brought those same characteristics to his 25 years as a supervisor and for Hanover Township in Northampton County, manager Jay Finnigan says.

A former supervisor himself, Finnigan says Diacogiannis, the board's chairman, is thorough and inquisitive. A passion for addressing residents' concerns prompts Diacogiannis to dig for information before making a recommendation, the manager says. "He is able to ask questions diplomatically to get to the meat of a matter," Finnigan says. "He won't accept the first answer if it doesn't get to the heart of the issue."

Vice chairman Glenn Walbert says his colleague's thoughtful deliberation makes him "a great guy to work with. He thinks things out thoroughly and makes good recommendations."

A balanced approach to development

Diacogiannis's thoughtful approach to governance has contributed to what he considers the township's best feature: well-planned development.

"We have logical and meaningful zoning, which has prevented the pain of developing too quickly or too slowly," he says. "We're located just outside the city of Bethlehem and close to Allentown and Easton, yet we enjoy a suburban area that is nicely developed without being overdone."

Finnigan seconds that characterization and credits Diacogiannis for persevering to make sure the township stays that way.

"His efforts have helped keep commercial and industrial development at the outer edges of the township and leave the center for residential development," he says.

Diacogiannis says the key is working cooperatively with both developers and residents. "We've always encouraged developers to present their plans to the public at a community meeting even before they present them to the planning commission or the board of supervisors," he says. "That way, residents are not caught off guard and everyone knows what to expect."

That can go a long way toward preventing opposition based on rumors and half-truths, the longtime supervisor says. "Some other municipalities in the Lehigh Valley have had strong opposition to development because there were people who stretched the truth about development plans just to pack the meeting room," he says. Defusing such a situation comes down to letting everyone have his say, he suggests.

"I've been in the audience in those kinds of situations, and when the people who are upset learn the truth, they realize they're not really against what's being proposed," he

says. “I don’t like to see people get upset for no reason. That’s why we urge developers to present their plans directly to the public. It’s always been successful.”

Diacogiannis began his township career with a stint on the planning commission, so he has an added perspective on the issue of development.

“We’ve had a comprehensive plan in place since before I joined the planning commission, which was in the process of updating it when I came on board,” he says. “For a while, we were updating it every five years to keep up with the pace of development.”

By allowing several large, mixed-use developments, the township has avoided a piecemeal approach to planning, Diacogiannis says. “Allowing large-scale development gives you a little more ability to shape the project to the comprehensive plan,” he says.

Proceeding with caution

Hanover Township’s careful approach to development has attracted many businesses and residents over the years, Diacogiannis says.

“When I first moved here 38 years ago, other than some small establishments along the highways and main roads, there were really no businesses in the township,” he says. “We were primarily a bedroom community for Bethlehem Steel workers.”

When the Lehigh Valley Industrial Park in nearby Bethlehem outgrew its space in the 1970s, the township rezoned some of its land for an expansion. “Everyone cooperated, and residents were receptive to the idea because it was going to bring jobs to the Lehigh Valley,” Diacogiannis says.

The township's population has doubled over the last four decades, now topping 10,000, and the community has progressed from being about 50 percent developed to almost fully developed.

Hanover Township was also one of the first municipalities in the area to build a community recreation center, Finnigan says. The township financed the center without raising taxes, and the facility has improved property values in the area, he says.

Diacogiannis also helped draft an ordinance to allow age-restricted communities, Finnigan says, and not just for the standard 55-and-over crowd. "The ordinance will allow 10 percent of the residents to be as young as 50, as long as they don't have a child living at home under the age of 20," he explains.

To really chart the municipality's progress, one need look no further than the municipal center, Diacogiannis says. "When I started, we had a barnlike garage where we stored the trucks, and the office and meeting room were in a 'loft' above. You had to walk through the trucks to get to the stairs, and then once upstairs, you had to duck your head to avoid the rafters."

The township eventually outgrew the barn and built a municipal center in the mid-to late-1970s, which has been expanded several times. A public works facility built later on the same property has also been expanded more than once.

"We probably had no more than 10 employees when I started," Diacogiannis says. "Everyone wore two or three hats."

Now, counting full- and part-time positions, including seasonal lifeguards and camp counselors, employees number well over 100, he says.

Fairness to all

The fairness that Diacogiannis shows to developers and residents carries over to his dealings with township staff, too, Finnigan says.

“John makes a habit of stopping in two or three times a quarter to get the pulse of the township staff and ask about their needs,” he says, “and he always takes the time to recognize a job well done.”

During the recent snowstorms in Pennsylvania, Diacogiannis spent six hours in a snowplow, beginning at 3 a.m., so he could understand what the operators experience, Finnigan says. “He’s just a down-to-earth, get-your-hands-dirty kind of supervisor,” he says.

“We have a phenomenal working relationship,” he adds. “He’s just a pleasure to work with.”

Vice chairman Walbert points to Diacogiannis’s lack of a hidden agenda as the key to his success as a supervisor.

“His goal is to serve the people of the community in the best way possible,” he says. “He is very open to input from the public and at one point held monthly meetings for people to air their thoughts and concerns outside of the regular supervisors meetings.” For his part, Diacogiannis says he’ll keep going as a supervisor until he gives out or the citizens “have had enough.”

That’s not likely to happen soon, given the supervisor’s balanced approach.

“We’ve been fair to the residents, businesses, developers, and ourselves,” Diacogiannis says. “Being fair about everything is what motivates us and keeps us going.”

PHOTO CUTLINE:

During the past 25 years, Hanover Township's John Diacogiannis has built a reputation for being fair, thorough, thoughtful, and inquisitive. "He's a great guy to work with," says a fellow supervisor. (*Socolow Photography*)