

An open door

Gary Hittle

Hempfield Township, Mercer County

30 years of service

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Every public servant knows that his is not a 9-to-5 job. That's particularly true for township supervisors, who, as the government officials closest to the people, are expected to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

It takes some township officials a while to get comfortable with that reality, but not Gary Hittle. The Hempfield Township, Mercer County, supervisor has been accessible to his community from the very start of his three decades in office.

"He's always been very approachable to the residents," says his son, Todd, who serves as the township's secretary-treasurer and zoning administrator. "In fact, he's helped me deal with the fact that we're always 'on call.'"

"Gary's an open-door type of guy," assistant secretary-treasurer Robin Fisher agrees. "His office is always open to anyone who walks in the door."

Of course, being that accessible means taking the bad with the good. If residents aren't happy, they'll let you know about it, Gary Hittle says.

"You have to listen and absorb what people say to the best of your ability," he says, "and then try to work out the differences. You learn to have patience and take some abuse. You just have to swallow hard and move on."

“Swallow hard,” as in swallow the words you’d like to say, his son Todd explains. “Another supervisor used to tell me that my dad often left the office with his tongue bleeding. When I asked him what he meant, he said it bled from having to bite it.”

A dedicated leader

While his open-door policy and listening skills have made him a popular leader, it is Hittle’s devotion to the township that has made him a trusted one.

Although he no longer works full-time on the township roads, which he did for 15 years, Hittle isn’t any less of a presence at the township. “Even though he’s retired from the daily grind,” Todd says, “Dad still spends at least four hours a day working as the wage tax collector.

“It’s fantastic to have his experience right across the hall,” he adds. “If I don’t have the answers, I don’t have to go very far to get them.”

“Gary loves the township,” Fisher says. “His focus is keeping Hempfield progressive while remembering that it’s the taxpayers’ dollars that we’re working with.”

That’s something the supervisor never forgets, his son says. “He’s a budget hawk,” he says of his father. “He makes sure I have my eyes on the budget at all times. We do as much as we can with what we have.”

Hittle himself points to the fact that although the township’s real estate tax has been raised only half a mill in 30 years, the municipality continues to grow.

“Our budget has gone from \$400,000 to \$1.4 million since I’ve been in office,” he says. “We have our own police department and volunteer fire department.”

Like many townships, Hempfield was hit hard by last year's recession. Hittle says the unemployment rate was between 10 and 12 percent this past fall, well above the state's rate of 8.5 percent. The board of supervisors had to cut nearly 10 percent from the budget for 2010.

Still, Hittle and his fellow supervisors have been able to keep taxes low thanks to a growing business district, complete with a Super Wal-Mart that faced the usual opposition when developers first proposed it. "The people who hollered the loudest shop there nearly every day," he says with a chuckle.

Doing what's best for the township

Unpopular development, sewage enforcement issues, unfunded state and federal mandates — it is these kinds of trials that keep the job interesting, Hittle says. "I like the challenges that pop up now and then," he says. "And I enjoy going to the PSATS conference, where I can talk to people from other townships about what they do to deal with similar issues."

Hittle points to the amicable relationship he has with the other supervisors, as well as the support he has from his family, as keys to his success as a leader.

"All the supervisors have gotten along really well over the years," he says. "We don't always agree, but we don't have knock-down fights. I've always been surrounded by good people."

"The supervisors work very well together," Fisher says. "They are all professional, respect each others' opinions, and aren't afraid they'll step on someone's toes if they voice their own. In the end, they all do what's best for the township."

That has included developing the commercial district, building the police department, expanding the sewer system while keeping the rates in check, and improving the municipal park. “We get more compliments about the park than anything else in the township,” Fisher says.

“Gary bases all of his decisions on what is best for the township,” she adds. “He puts a lot of thought into any issue that comes before him and does a lot of research before making a decision.”

For his part, Hittle says he’s just doing what the people want. His son and the assistant secretary-treasurer think it’s more than that, however. That open-door policy not only allows residents to come to Hittle but also allows him to go where he’s needed.

“He likes to be involved in the community,” Fisher says. “If he sees a need, he’ll act.”

“He really takes pride in getting out and about in the township,” his son agrees. “He welcomes feedback and takes phone calls all the time. Residents feel comfortable approaching him about problems or concerns.”

“He’s just an all-around good guy,” Fisher concludes. “He works well with everyone and really looks out for the taxpayer.”

PHOTO OUTLINE:

Hempfield Township's Gary Hittle, a popular leader, has spent three decades looking out for taxpayers. "Gary bases all of his decisions on what is best for the township," assistant secretary-treasurer Robin Fisher says. "He puts a lot of thought into any issue that comes before him."

PHOTO CREDIT: Socolow Photography