

HALLOFFAME

As retirement beckons, **Karen Ahlgrim** looks back at her 35 years of service with North East Township, including two decades as secretary-treasurer, and what has been a satisfying career as a public servant.

An Unexpected Yet Fulfilling Career

Karen Ahlgrim

North East Township, Erie County
20 years of service

BY AMY BOBB / ASSISTANT EDITOR

In November 1985, Karen Ahlgrim's brother, who was a North East Township supervisor at the time, asked her if she wanted to help in the wage tax office for a few weeks. She agreed, never imagining that this temporary assignment would turn into a 35-year career with the Erie County township.

"I thought I would earn a few extra dollars around the holiday," she recalls. However, when the tax collector became ill, Ahlgrim stepped in to take the full-time position. It was the start of what would be three-and-a-half decades of public service, including the last two as the township secretary-treasurer.

"The job just never ended," she says about the part-time start, "but I'm happy things turned out like they did." She has enjoyed being part of what she calls "the ground level of government" and making a difference in the community where she was born and raised and



where she plans to stay upon retiring at the end of this month.

Adjusting to public service

Except for a four-year stint in North Carolina, North East Township has always been Ahlgrim's home. Today, she lives just a mile from the house where she grew up. She loves her community and its location on the southeastern shore of Lake Erie.

Not only does the township boast wonderful waterfront acreage, she

After a satisfying 35-year career with North East Township in Erie County, Karen Ahlgrim is retiring this month. She served two decades as the township secretary-treasurer.

says, but its climate is ideal for growing grapes. Located within what is called the Concord Grape Belt, the largest and oldest such region in the world, the community is home to dozens of vineyards, 11 wineries at last count, and a Welch's plant, where grapes are squeezed into juice, jams, and jellies.

Ahlgrim was a young mother of two girls when she went to work for the township. She admits that she knew little about local government at the time.

"As a normal citizen, I didn't pay attention to what the township does," she says. "In fact, before I came to work here, I'm not sure I even knew where the township building was."

Her crash course in township government began in the tax office, where one of the biggest adjustments was learning to deal with residents. In her previous job at a paper company, she did data entry and took orders but had no contact with the public.

"It was a whole new experience coming here," she says. "I realized pretty

"The township secretary wears many hats. Because we are so small with limited staff, you have to be willing to take on new things."

How PSATS has helped this Hall of Famer

From training and conferences to advice and resources, PSATS offers a wide range of services that Karen Ahlgrim has taken full advantage of throughout her career.

"It's truly amazing how much PSATS has grown and changed over the years to help townships," she says. "In training my replacement, I tell her almost every day that she can always call PSATS if she has a question."

quickly that people don't really like tax collectors."

After 10 years in the tax office, she moved into the role of assistant township secretary and in 2000, became the secretary-treasurer, where serving the public took on even more meaning.

"Dealing with people is one of the most challenging parts of the job," Ahlgrim says. "You just have to learn patience and try to understand where others are coming from within their own lives."

Without prior municipal education or experience, she says that everything she learned about managing a township has come from hands-on practice with the welcomed help of PSATS training and the advice of other secretary-treasurers in the county who meet quarterly as a group.

"I tell Erica [Carlstrom, her replacement as secretary] that if she ever has a question, she can call any of them," she says. "We are there for each other." Another key lesson she has passed on to Carlstrom is that the township secretary-treasurer must learn to juggle varied responsibilities.

"It's more than minutes and agendas," she says. "I deal with budgets, insurance, pensions, the census, and even CDL [commercial driver's license] requirements."

"What I like most about this job is that every day, there is something different."

She attributes her success in the job to a willingness to learn.

"The township secretary wears many hats," she says. "Because we are so small with limited staff, you have to be willing to take on new things."

Successes and challenges

Over the decades, Ahlgrim has been front and center for many of the township's milestones, including its computerization, the creation of a curbside recycling program (*one of the first multimunicipal-coordinated efforts in the state*), and the paving of its roads.

"I am proud to report that we no longer have any dirt roads to maintain," she says. "That had been a big goal of every supervisor I've worked with."

Maintaining the township's 42 miles of roads, including plowing the roughly 100 inches of snow received in an average winter, is just one of the many services the township provides. In fact, for a rural community of 6,300, the township offers a surprisingly wide range of services and is always looking to do more for its residents, whether it's seeking new markets for recycled glass or expanding sewer and water to more households.

"What I like most about this job is that every day, there is something different," Ahlgrim says.

That's not to say that the job doesn't bring its share of challenges, such as keeping up with an increasing number of state and federal mandates.

"One of the things I like the least are bridge projects," she says. "The requirements for tearing down and rebuilding bridges have become so complicated."

Several years ago, the community faced one of its most challenging peri-

ods when developers sought to bring gas wells and later windmills to the township. For various reasons, both projects eventually fell by the wayside but not before the township endured months of conflict and heated, packed meetings.

"Those were rough times, and people were very emotional," Ahlgrim recalls.

Once the controversies subsided, however, things soon settled down, and today all is relatively quiet again in North East Township.

"The supervisors work very well with the public," she says. "We don't get too many upset people."

Riding off into the sunset

Despite 35 fulfilling years as a township employee, Ahlgrim says she is ready to retire.

"It's just life," she says. "We all have a time to go."

After enduring a lifetime of harsh winters, she anticipates traveling and going somewhere warmer in the winter. Still, there is plenty to keep her content in North East Township for the rest of the year.

She and her pilot husband own a private airport on their property, and she enjoys flying with him. She is also looking forward to spending more time with family. Ahlgrim's father is 100 years old and still going strong. Her oldest daughter lives next door, and her other daughter and four grandchildren, ranging in age from 12 years to several months, are only an hour's drive away.

Sure, she will miss the work she did at the township and the coworkers, supervisors, and residents whom she has gotten to know over the decades.

"I like working with people," she says, "but I'm ready for the next chapter of my life to begin." ♦

Follow PSATS on Social Media



Facebook



Twitter



LinkedIn



Instagram