

SUPERVISOR

HALLOFFAME

Frank Burkhart wasn't going to accept an appointment to the board of supervisors for West Hempfield Township in Lancaster County in 1973. Forty-one years later, a lot of people are glad he did. His honesty, humor, and sense of fairness have helped the township grow responsibly while preserving its agricultural heritage.

'Here for the community'

Frank Burkhart
West Hempfield Township,
Lancaster County
41 years of service

BY JENNIFER L. FLORER /
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Frank Burkhart was born in the community of Farmersville in West Hempfield Township, Lancaster County. Talk to him for a short while, and you might start to wonder if that had some bearing on the degree to which he has spent his life connected to the land: farming it, shaping it in his work as an excavator, preserving it, and making sure it is developed responsibly.

In fact, Burkhart and his wife, Doris, were busy farming and raising a family when he was asked to fill a vacant seat on the board of supervisors in 1973. He declined.

"It wasn't something that I was reaching for," Burkhart says. "I was helping my dad, and we were farming the better part of 300 acres — growing potatoes, and that's pretty labor-intensive."

Then came the second request, followed by a third. Finally, Burkhart agreed.

The township had a population



A lot of things have changed in West Hempfield Township, Lancaster County, since Frank Burkhart took office more than four decades ago. His commitment to the residents, however, has been unwavering.

of about 6,500 at that time, and the balancing act of preserving the area's farmland while managing development was just beginning. Those were important issues to Burkhart, who lived on the land his family had first purchased in 1942.

As it turns out, he's been tackling those issues, and many more, as a supervisor ever since. His commitment to the

residents during 41 years of service has never wavered.

"Frank has never been here for his own purposes," manager Ron Youtz says. "He's here for the community."

While that hasn't changed, the makeup of the township has. Since he first took office, Burkhart has gained almost 10,000 new neighbors. The township population now stands at just over 16,000.

Growing right

That kind of growth doesn't come without its share of controversies, but Burkhart says good people and a spirit of cooperation have pulled everyone through. The supervisors have implemented some forward-thinking policies, such as transferable development rights — allowing a landowner to sell off the right to develop his own land, thereby preserving it, to a developer in a planned growth area. Both reap the benefits.

Following the townships' biggest growth spurt, in the 1980s, residents voted to increase the board from three to five supervisors. As with all issues, Burkhart took a practical view of the change then, as he does now.

"I didn't see it as being overly essential at the time it was discussed," he says. Now, however, he appreciates the diversity of the larger board.

"When you have a variety of people, they each bring their own area of expertise," he says. "It broadens the horizon."

About the same time the board was expanded, the supervisors decided to

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hire a township manager.

“It made being a township supervisor a bit easier because he would handle the day-to-day things and then consult with the board members as needed,” Burkhart says.

That left more time for the supervisors to focus on the big picture. These days, that includes what has become a major controversy: the proposed siting of a natural gas pipeline through part of the township. As usual, Burkhart can put the issue in perspective with just a few words.

He grew up with two pipelines running through the family farm, he says. He doesn't minimize the impact a pipeline can have — a landowner can't build near it, and it does affect crop yield and maturity rate if it's running through a farm.

However, he says, “It's not an easy fix, but there is a need to try and find a common-sense approach.”

That means collaboration and cooperation, two things the supervisors and employees in this township have a lot of experience with.

Teamwork

Burkhart is quick to note how important the employees are and the critical role they play in moving the community forward.

“Through the years, we have been very fortunate with the people who have worked in the township,” he adds.

He also believes in letting the staff do their job and not trying to do it for them.

For instance, Burkhart says: “I've learned you have the zoning officer there to work with that part of the township. As a board member, you are to understand their interpretation of the ordinance. If you don't agree with it, then you need to address that. It all goes back to everyone doing their job and doing it well.”

The board members also try to establish a kind of team effort with developers, Burkhart says, while maintaining their role as the decision makers. He recounts one instance when the board was going to table a decision

about a development plan. As an excavator, Burkhart knew that delay would have the developer contending with some tough weather conditions. They approved the plan.

Those courtesies work both ways.

“We've had responsible people come into the township to do a complete development,” Burkhart says. “Some really stand out as being top-notch.”

Many would apply those same words to Burkhart, including manager Ron Youtz.

“We get the pleasure of working with him daily, and we all would aspire to be like him: very honest, very gentle,” Youtz says.

In nominating Burkhart for the Hall of Fame, board chairman David Dumeyer noted Burkhart's stabilizing influence.

“Frank's homespun honesty and sense of humor have defused the occa-

sional tense atmosphere when controversial issues come before the board,” he wrote. “Respected for his honesty, sense of fairness, and concern for the welfare of the residents, Burkhart remains a valuable resource both to the township and to his fellow supervisors.”

Burkhart expects to hand off his township duties to a newly elected supervisor when he completes his seventh full term in 2017. He has some thoughts on the qualities that person should have.

“Realize from the start that one person isn't going to be in control,” he says. “If you don't have an interest in cooperating with people, then don't get into it. Be willing to share your opinion, but when somebody talks, you need to listen, rather than thinking what you're going to say in the next mouthful — and be polite, no matter what you say.” ♦

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