

HALLOFFAME

Her shorthand skills may have gotten her the job as secretary of McKean Township, Erie County, but after 32 years in the position, including nine years as a township supervisor, **Janice Dennis** has proven that she has so much more to offer.

A secretary plus so much more

Janice Dennis

McKean Township, Erie County
32 years of service

BY AMY BOBB / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When McKean Township in Erie County was looking for someone to be its township secretary in 1984, the supervisors at the time had a specific criterion in mind: the person had to know shorthand.

Janice Dennis fit the bill. As an executive secretary at General Electric before staying home with her daughters, Dennis could take 120 words per minute in shorthand and type 80 words per minute. A gifted typist and stenographer, she was hired for the part-time position.

What the supervisors who first employed her couldn't have foreseen was not only did they find a secretary who could more than handle taking minutes at their meetings, but they had hired someone who would stick around for more than three decades, take on the zoning officer duties, and eventually become a township supervisor herself.

"When I first started, all my expertise was secretarial, and local government was a totally new experience for me," Dennis says. "I hadn't bothered with my local government before then.



McKean Township in Erie County got so much more than a gifted typist and stenographer when they hired Janice Dennis, who serves as both secretary and supervisor.

I didn't even know where the municipal building was."

A quick study, she approached her new job with fresh eyes.

"I didn't just do things the same old way because that was the way they've always done it," she says. "After all, that's not always the correct way."

She studied the laws and regulations and learned how local government operates — "I found out it's hard to get things done as quickly in government as it is in private industry," she notes — and she put her efficient clerical and organizational skills to work. The super-

visors were so impressed that two years after she was hired, they asked her to take on the supplemental job of zoning officer, a position she held until she was elected township supervisor in 2007.

"When I started, they told me I would be working for cigarette money," she says. "After a while, I thought you have to be kidding me. What began as four hours became five hours and then six until the job ended up being seven hours a day."

A streamlined office

In every task she undertakes, Dennis seeks ways to make the job more streamlined and bring results that make a difference. Take the position of zoning officer as an example.

"I would go out and measure properties and draw them to scale on a master plan," she says. "This was in the days before computers."

Her measurements proved so precise and her master plan so helpful that the current zoning officer still uses her documents today. Eventually, once the township got computers, Dennis transferred the zoning information, including uses and districts, from paper to an electronic format. She also codified all the ordinances. After years spent organizing township records and bringing tasks up to modern standards, she is proud of her streamlined and efficient office.

"The more organized you are, the fewer hours you have to work," she says.

As an example, she cites that record retention, which “used to take forever to go through everything,” now only takes a half-hour to accomplish at the beginning of each year.

“Our township is way ahead of everybody else because of what Janice knows and how she takes care of things,” says Jeffrey Brooks, a roadmaster for the township.

Brooks recalls when he and Dennis both started working for the township in 1984.

“She was something,” he says, “and she didn’t take any crap from all the men she worked with.”

After 32 years together at the township, he says their working relationship is almost like a marriage, and he has nothing but praise for her.

“She would bend over backward for anyone,” Brooks says. “She knows her stuff and is not afraid to get her hands dirty.”

His only wish is that she would have run for township supervisor earlier.

“She’s contributed so much to our township,” he says. “We need more like her. I really don’t know how anyone can replace her. In fact, when she decides to retire, I’m leaving, too.”

Thrilled to be supervisor

When Dennis first ran for township supervisor in 2007, she was 62 years old, and people wondered why she was running for public office so close to retirement age. Now 70, she has semi-retired by cutting back her secretarial duties to two days a week, but she has no plans to stop serving as McKean Township’s first and only female supervisor.

“I was thrilled to be elected supervisor,” she says. “The secretary job may be my forte, but I love the elected part of my job. I truly believe I am making a difference.”

After years of serving as the behind-the-scenes person to the board of supervisors, Dennis says it has been rewarding to step up and take more visible action as an elected official. Much of her efforts as supervisor are focused on helping to manage the township’s roads.

“What the residents and taxpayers see every day are the roads and bridges they drive on,” she says. “What the secretary accomplishes in the office is not nearly so visible.”

As chair of the board of supervisors,

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she meets monthly with Brooks and the two other supervisors, who both serve as roadmasters, to decide on projects. Bringing her proven organizational skills to these sessions, she helped to implement a four-year rotating road repair program in which one-quarter of the township’s 66 miles of road are targeted for sealcoat treatment each year.

“Our township made the investment to cover all of our previously dirt roads with asphalt so it’s important that we maintain them,” she says. “With this program, all of our roads receive a single sealcoat by the end of each four-year cycle.”

Dennis is happy to be giving back to the township where she has lived for 43 years and raised her family. In addition to her service to the township, she has been an officer in the county association and with various other community organizations, including as vice

president of the Erie County Emergency Management Agency and treasurer of the McKean Little League. She even founded a local women’s softball league, in which she played until age 62.

Now midway through her second term as supervisor, Dennis is the longest-serving supervisor on the current board.

“I just love local government and what I do,” she says. “I like helping residents and trying to solve problems. I also enjoy running the board meetings and bringing my organizational skills to the meetings.”

And those shorthand skills that first got her hired? Well, they still come in handy.

“Now as the chair of the board of supervisors, I can take the minutes in shorthand while I’m conducting the meeting,” she says. ♦

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