

HALLOFFAME

As **Bill Schenck** prepares to step down as township supervisor at the end of this year, he looks back at his 24-year public career and how he has helped make his community a better place.

From Volunteer to Local Leader

William Schenck
Springettsbury Township,
York County
24 years of service

BY AMY BOBB /
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Like many township supervisors, William Schenck got his start as a volunteer.

When he was appointed to a committee tasked with building a wooden playground in Springettsbury Township, York County, he had no idea that work would lead to serving as an elected official for the next 24 years. He certainly didn't expect to have a voice in making the kinds of decisions that would influence the direction and design of his community.

"I've learned and experienced things as a township supervisor that I would never know any other way," Schenck says. "I know how a sewer system works, how a police department works, and how union contracts work. It's been very rewarding to gain such knowledge."

While serving on the playground



As William Schenck of Springettsbury Township prepares to leave public life behind, his advice to new supervisors is to seek out different thoughts and not feel pressure to conform to popular opinion. "That philosophy has served me well over the years," he says.

committee, he first came in contact with a number of township officials and was impressed with what he saw.

"Soon after, I was at a social event talking to a township supervisor," Schenck says, "and telling him how I found the township people to be so caring and engaged. He said, 'It sounds like

you should run for township supervisor.'"

That off-the-cuff suggestion stuck with Schenck, who decided to run in the next municipal election. Now, nearly a quarter century later, Schenck's career as a township supervisor is coming to an end this month. He decided not to seek re-election this year.

Making tough decisions

When Schenck attended his first board meeting as a township supervisor in January 1994, he felt pretty comfortable with the issues the township was grappling with.

"I had been attending meetings in the 10 months throughout the election period," he says. "I thought I understood the expectations of the job."

However, he realized there was a lot more to learn once the board went into an executive session one night about a legal issue.

"That scared me," he says. "It was pretty complicated."

To bring himself up to speed, he read whatever materials he could get his hands on and sought input and advice from the township's consultants, including the solicitor and engineer.

"By nature, I learn by reading," he says. "I'm probably one of the few township supervisors who has read the entire Second Class Township Code."

His philosophy when it comes to governing is to research first and then make the best decision he can for the community.

"I've learned and experienced things as a township supervisor **that I would never know** any other way."

“One of the lessons I’ve learned as a township supervisor is that **you can never make everybody happy** in every decision.”

“I want to be able to wake up the next day and feel comfortable in my decision,” he says. “To do that, I try to get as much input as I can. I will seek out counter thinking and learn all I can about what everyone’s concerns are.”

His constant pursuit of knowledge greatly impressed Don Bishop, who served alongside him as a supervisor for 20 years.

“Bill is the most knowledgeable supervisor I ever ran into,” he says. “He does his homework and learns everything he can about a topic. He is also level-headed and always took the time to explain to the public, especially when he was chair, what we were doing.”

In a township the size of Springettsbury, which has more than 26,500 residents and close to 100 employees, conflicts are inevitable. One of the first controversies Schenck faced was a land swap proposal in which a developer wanted access to a large tract of essentially undeveloped park land in the center of the township. In exchange for this township property, the developer offered to build a new park and township building on some other acreage.

“Financially, it looked like a great deal,” Schenck says, “but the existing park was located right in the middle of the township and recognized as the ‘downtown of Springettsbury.’ We had to overlook the financial implications and ultimately voted it down.”

After that, the township decided to fully develop the existing park. The resulting 51-acre Springettsbury Park, with its amphitheater, sports fields and courts, playground, and walking paths, is now the crown jewel of the township’s 11-park system.

A more recent controversy involved the township’s decision to get out of the emergency medical services (EMS) business (*the township was one of a few in the state with its own paid EMS employees*) and turn that responsibility over to the private sector.

“One of the lessons I’ve learned as a township supervisor is that you can never make everybody happy in every decision,” he says. “You just have to do

the best you can and recognize that someone somewhere will not be happy.”

Improving the township

When Schenck looks back over his tenure as a public official, he is proud of how he has helped to improve the community where he has lived for 44 years and where he and his wife, Harriett, have raised a family. (*Their daughter, Hilary, lives in London today. Their son, Harry, passed away in 2003 at the age of 16. The family set up a memorial fund to maintain what had been Harry’s Eagle Scout project — a boardwalk through a wetland in one of the township parks.*)

During a time when the township was without a manager, for example, Schenck was tasked with overseeing the public works department, and he soon realized that many sewer lines needed to be repaired or replaced.

“It turned out to be a 15-year project to bring the sewer system up to where it should be,” he says. “It’s an unseen infrastructure that nobody really thinks about, but I’m proud of how we have tackled it.”

Bishop credits Schenck’s “out-of-the-box thinking” with saving the township millions of dollars when the sewage treatment plant was running out of capacity.

“All the professionals gave expansion ideas that would have cost tens of millions of dollars,” Bishop says. “Bill looked at the problem and noticed that almost all the sewage passed a neighboring sewage plant with lots of capacity. Why don’t we just buy capacity from them, he said. That’s what we did. It saved us \$10-15 million and has worked for the last 15 years.”

Schenck was also on the ground floor of talks with a neighboring township in 2004 to combine their professional fire departments. Three years later, the York Area United Fire and Rescue became the first regional paid fire company in the state, says Schenck, who chairs the commission overseeing the company.

“It has been wildly successful,” he says, noting that a third township recently brought its fire department on board, too.

As he prepares to leave public life behind, Schenck recalls the conversation he had with that township supervisor 25 years ago during which he asked about the time commitments of the job.

“He said it just becomes a part of your life,” he says. “That stuck with me because it’s true.”

In addition to chairing the area fire commission, Schenck also has served on the boards of the volunteer fire company and the firemen’s relief fund and on municipal advisory committees for the York County Planning Commission and Metro York Committee. He is currently in his second go-around as president of the York County Association of Township Officials.

“It was not unusual for me to be out three evenings a week because of other activities,” he says.

As he anticipates retiring in a few years from his day job in sales at a metal fabricator, Schenck, 63, decided now was a good time to wind down his public career, too.

“It’s time,” he says. Plus, he feels confident the township is in good hands. “We have a good board and manager in place.”

All the same, Springettsbury is sure to miss Schenck’s wisdom and leadership.

“He did a heck of a lot behind the scenes to make Springettsbury better,” Bishop says. “He is extraordinary, a one-in-a-million leader, and he will be missed.” ♦

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How PSATS has helped this Hall of Famer

As someone who makes sure he does his homework first, Bill Schenck has come to appreciate PSATS’ many resources, including publications, the Annual Educational Conference, lobbying efforts, and staff expertise.

“The Association’s information database is incredible,” he says. “No matter what the issue or concern, PSATS will have the answer.”