



HONORING TOWNSHIPS' UNSUNG HEROES

Township Volunteer Brings Dedication, Commitment to Open Space Preservation

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Halfmoon Township in Centre County has preserved some 2,000 acres due, in part, to the efforts of Bob Eberhart, who has worked tirelessly to save natural resources in his community and the surrounding area.

A former faculty member in Penn State University's Department of Veterinary Science, Eberhart was a long-time hunter and is still an avid fisherman who moved to the rural township after retiring more than 20 years ago.

"It wasn't long before someone who knew me suggested I might want to work on the planning commission," he recalls.

So began 22 years on the commission, during which he represented the group on its regional counterpart, and later, on the township's open space preservation board for 14 years. The latter resulted from a 1999 referendum in which voters approved a 2-mill real estate tax for open space preservation.

After the preservation board recommends an application and the township supervisors approve it, the owner receives a yearly "rental" payment from the municipality in exchange for not developing the land. These 99-year "leases" cost less than purchasing the development rights, Eberhart says.

Asking the right questions

Preservation board chair Ron Hoover says Eberhart has gone above and beyond to make the program work.

"Bob was instrumental in getting the open space program up and running and



Bob Eberhart, who lives and volunteers in Halfmoon Township, Centre County, helped to preserve more than 2,000 acres of land and receives high praise from colleagues. "If you look up 'great volunteer' in the dictionary," one said recently, "you'll see Bob's picture."

helped craft the language for the open space ordinance," he says. "He's always taken the time to research issues that the board perhaps doesn't fully understand."

Part of Eberhart's effectiveness lies in asking pointed questions and keeping at it until he gets the information he needs, Hoover says. At times, that can ruffle some feathers.

"People might take it the wrong way and not understand his methods," he says.

On the other hand, Eberhart is very good at sensing when someone is growing uncomfortable with his questions, and he will back off, take a different tack, and come back to that issue from

a different angle, Hoover says.

"He never wants people at the end of the discussion to be miffed at him," he says.

Helping the larger community

Eberhart's volunteer efforts have extended beyond the township's borders. In addition to working with the Centre Region Planning Commission, he represented the township on the Spring Creek Watershed Commission and has been active in the Spring Creek Watershed Association. These groups work to preserve and protect resources in the watershed.

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He also was active in the effort to preserve Spring Creek Canyon, a natural treasure that offers hiking and fishing in pristine wilderness. The Centre County Farmland Trust also benefited from Eberhart's help for a number of years. The organization holds agricultural easements on farmland that the owners want to preserve but isn't large enough or of good enough quality to meet the criteria for the state farmland preservation program.

Dedication and commitment

Eberhart has always been engaged in what is going on in the township and has always made himself available to go to extra meetings and do whatever needs to be done, Hoover says. That persistence and dedication have rubbed off on those he has worked with, too.

"He has made me better at what I

do on the board and outside the board," says Hoover, who teaches agriculture at Penn State. "He thinks things through and anticipates what the challenges might be. I realized within a year or two how good he is to work with."

Township supervisor Ben Pisoni shares that sentiment. "It's easy for people to say that they want to get involved in their community but difficult to actually do it," he says. "Bob is one who did."

Pisoni says that anytime the township needed someone to sit on a committee, Eberhart's name was the first to come up.

"Townships are very lucky to have citizens like Bob," he says. "We have other great volunteers, but he has gone above and beyond."

Hoover couldn't agree more.

"He recognizes the need to help, steps up, puts in a lot of time, and makes a commitment to attend meet-

ings," he says. "Bob is thorough, well-spoken, punctual, and good-natured. If you look up 'great volunteer' in the dictionary, you'll see Bob's picture."

Although Eberhart stepped down from the open space preservation board at the end of 2013, he continues to support natural resource conservation in the area as a member of the Spring Creek Watershed Association and the Spring Creek chapter of Trout Unlimited.

"My perspective has always been that we should try to preserve the natural resources we have that contribute so much to the quality of life," Eberhart says.

His absence will be keenly felt by the other members of the open space preservation board, Hoover says.

"The fact that Bob has stepped away from the board is a great loss for us," he says. "He's the kind of citizen we should have more of in our communities." ♦

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