

Away in a Manager

July 19, 2022

The relationship of municipal manager **Bill Shepeluk** with VLCT goes back even longer than his thirty-four years in Waterbury.

In 1982, his future wife, Ingrid Ohs, began teaching fifth and sixth grades in Canaan, Vermont, while Bill was still getting his master's degree at Syracuse University. Hoping to find work in New England, he saw a posting in an International City/County Management Association newsletter for an interim town manager for Brighton-Island Pond. When he discovered that Brighton was a mere 15 miles from Canaan (not knowing that in Vermont they were "as the crow flies" miles), he interviewed for the position and was hired.

Later that year, he attended his first Town Fair, which in those days was always held in Barre. He says the business meeting resembled a town meeting – his first exposure to that type of direct democracy – with attendees sometimes standing up to pontificate over what seemed like a pet issue.

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"Right away, I got involved with VTCMA [Vermont Town and City Management Association]," he says. "VLCT did a lot of the VTCMA administrative work, like they do today. I got exposed to the Health Trust because I was an employee in Brighton and had VLCT health insurance. I thought I'd like to take a stab at being on their board and submitted an application. Happily, they selected me. Since 1986, I've had some official involvement with VLCT."

That is so true. Bill was elected president of the Health Trust Board in 1992 and remained in that role until 2015, when the trust merged with the Unemployment Insurance Board to become the VLCT Employment Resource and Benefits (VERB) Trust. At that time, Bill became the Board's president, a position he still holds.

Also in 1992, Bill was elected to the VLCT Board of Directors. He served as VLCT president in 2002 and 2003 and as immediate past president in 2004. Then, due to various circumstances, he continued as immediate past president in 2005, part of 2006, 2007 through

2011, part of 2012, and 2013, 2015, 2016, and 2017.

“The League is such a great organization,” he says. “I’m convinced VLCT is one reason I’m still in Vermont, still in Waterbury.” He notes the numerous opportunities the League provided, such as allowing him to attend out-of-state conferences to meet with consultants and insurance company representatives as well as the annual meetings of the National League of Cities. “It’s that connection with the League that really piqued my interest in these things that a lot of people in communities of this size across the country don’t have.”

“I love my job here,” he continues. “It’s so varied! Being a manager in a small place like this, I have some professional staff, but I know a lot about wastewater treatment. I can talk about phosphorus removal and sludge with the best of lay people anywhere, I think. I get to be involved in bridge building and Main Street reconstruction and economic development and grant administration. I have a \$1.7 million revolving loan fund. I’m involved in investing the town’s reserve assets. Recreation? You name it! [I’ve dealt with *all* of those issues.] The varied nature of this job has made it very interesting and exciting.”

Over the last ten years, the public’s need for more and easier access to public officials has increased to the point where he now sometimes seems to spend a couple of hours each day answering emails. “When I first started in this job,” he says, “if people really had an issue, they would come in and talk to you or call you on the phone. If they were really upset, they would write a letter, heaven forbid!”

He says the legal questions towns deal with today have much more to do with diversity and equity. “That was an unknown concept to me even five years ago. But it’s really amped up in terms of what municipal officials deal with. VLCT is trying to help us by providing training and simply elevating the issue in conversations so we’re aware that it’s there, if somehow it hasn’t happened in our community yet.

“Back in the day,” he continues, “VLCT spent a lot of time on Vermont local roads and other nuts-and-bolts issues. The VLCT [municipal] policy was about getting legislation to help us with water and wastewater, getting us enough money to make sure we had good sidewalks and streets, the bridges were safe, and the fire department was ready to go when called. The public now seemingly demands a lot more time be spent on issues that are important but are more esoteric. And it’s harder to see if you’ve had an impact. In the old days, you could say, ‘Main Street was really in bad shape but now look at it. It’s beautiful! We spent \$20 million and

I know what we spent it on.’ Whereas the issues that municipal officials face today – you never have the sense of, okay, I can check that off the to-do list. And that’s a big change.”

Bill has no definite plans following his retirement, scheduled for the end of 2022, though he does look forward to being able to visit his children and grandchildren when he’d like, “as opposed to when it fits into the municipal calendar,” he says.

Although the term of Barre City manager **Steve Mackenzie** lasted a comparatively brief twelve years, he’s justifiably proud of the fact that it’s the longest tenure of any previous manager in the city. Born and brought up in Barre, Steve had always intended to go into civic service, beginning when he joined Kiwanis International many years ago. He later served on the then-Barre City Elementary School Board, and both the Barre City and Spaulding High School boards, assuming the role of chairperson in each instance. A Ward 2 City Council seat soon followed.

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He was beginning his third term as city councilor when then-manager John Craig resigned to take an out-of-state job. At the time, the city’s huge North Main Street reconstruction project known as the “Big Dig” was imminent, and Craig’s resignation caused some to worry about who could fill his role and ensure that the reconstruction remained on track. But because Steve had been doing project development and management for thirty-seven years as a consulting engineer with Dubois & King, a Randolph-based engineering firm, he interviewed for the position. And he was the logical choice. After all, he was the only candidate who was a hometown boy who knew the city intimately; who was familiar with municipal infrastructure projects; and who was already comfortable working with selectboards, city councils, and public works directors.

“When I first walked through the door here,” he now recalls, “I thought I had a good idea of what a municipal manager did, but it didn’t take long for me to realize I really didn’t know. I came on with a zeal that I think anybody new to a position would have. I tried to attend any meeting of more than two people – a schedule that was simply not feasible. But I found it a challenging job, and that’s what made it interesting.”

Steve lists a few projects that were successfully completed on his watch. Not surprisingly, he takes special delight in noting the engineering problems that were solved.

- The Big Dig (excavating North Main Street to replace underground water and sewer lines and enhance sidewalks and streetscapes) Because it was the Agency of Transportation's first downtown reconstruction project, they were receptive to community feedback. The city did not lose a single business during the entire process.
- Keith Avenue Parking Lot (remediating the cleaning fluid contaminants left in the ground by former dry cleaners)
- Granite Street Storm Sewer Project (replacing an undersized, eight-inch storm sewer in poor condition and securing Federal Emergency Management Agency grant funds)
- Harrington Avenue - Brook Street Flood Mitigation Project (removing a bridge and constructing a flood rack)
- Enterprise Alley Redevelopment and Remediation Project (redeveloping a blighted neighborhood and remediating substantial underground contamination)
- Rehabilitation of the municipal pool (The pool had been part of the fabric of the community for decades and anchored the whole recreational facility. Building a new pool was cost prohibitive; it had to be refurbished. One notable feature is the new zero or "beach" entry, where mobility-challenged people can easily enter the pool.)

Another challenge occurred in May of 2011, when heavy rains devastated much of central Vermont. Then-Mayor Thom Lauzon said the resulting flood damaged every single building in a 10-block area of the city and covered Main Street and the downtown parking areas in a muddy silt that was three feet deep in places.

Because Steve had never before dealt with a municipal disaster, especially one of such magnitude, "I had to sit down, take things one step at a time, and figure how to work through it all" – the same approach he's used to successfully deal with the many other unforeseen challenges to a city manager that crop up almost every day.

Like Bill Shepeluk, Steve doesn't have specific plans for his post-managerial life – which officially ended earlier this month. "I'm going to take three to six months to decompress," he says, "to walk away from the deadlines and the inherent demands of the job – the weekly cycles, the quarterly cycles, the annual cycles. I certainly don't feel like I'll be bored, but if I do, then I'll look around and find something else to do."

As there is always something else to do, there is always someone else to do it, though the residents of Waterbury Town and Barre City may be forgiven if they wonder if there will ever be anyone as uniquely qualified as these two long-serving and dedicated public servants have been!