

## Government on the Home Front

By Frank DiLeonardi

As the saying goes, all politics are local. But, what has governance looked like over the years in Manitowish Waters? To find out, we consulted our archives and spoke with John Hanson, town board chairman since 2001.

Did you know that from 1928-40 we were named the Town of Spider Lake? And, before that, we were part of Lac du Flambeau, according to town historian Michael Dunn.

Our original form of electing government officials was through a caucus, with the first annual caucus of Spider Lake Township held on March 17, 1928. T.J. Koerner was selected as chairman for the caucus, with W.O. Strandberg elected clerk. The chair called for nominations, and the caucus nominated Koerner as the first town chairman, without opposition. (To see the Spider Lake Township meeting minutes from 1928-39, click here: <https://mwhistory.org/spider-lake-minutes-2/>.)

Our officials back then were a town chairman, two supervisors, a clerk, an assessor, a town treasurer, a justice of the peace and a constable. They were elected through a caucus until about 1950 when it switched to the general election process still employed today. And, along the way, the magistrate and constable were phased out, with Manitowish Waters relying on Vilas County resources.

### Town Name Change

In 1940, Manitowish Waters was born. "You would think that when the name change came up in a board meeting in 1939, it would be a big event. One of the supervisors made a motion to change the name to Manitowish Waters, it was seconded and it passed. That was it," Hanson shared.

It is believed that we needed to change our name because there was another Spider Lake in the state, and we wanted our own post office. "The Postal Service said if you want your own, you need to change your name," Hanson explained. Until that time, Manitowish served as our post office. So, in addition to becoming Manitowish Waters, that timeframe marked the beginning of the MW Post Office, believed to be housed initially in one of the cottages at Rudy's Resthaven, Parkside Tavern today.

### Zoning Ordinances

A major event in local politics, in Hanson's mind, was the town establishing its own zoning ordinance back in the mid-1980s. "It's been particularly beneficial to how our lake shores have been developed because one of the unique things they did back then was to create 200-foot minimum lots so that prevented real dense development on the lake shores. The citizens didn't want a town with 50-foot lots."

During his time as town chairman, Hanson believes additional changes to the zoning ordinance and the comprehensive plan, which outlines how the citizens would like to see how the town develops (and its update), were significant. "Arriving at the ordinance that we did, some people thought it was too strict, some thought it wasn't strict enough so it was a compromise. It was complicated and took a substantial number of meetings and work to get it done."

### Uihlein's Contributions

The town chairman also points to the Uihleins arrival and all that they have contributed to the town over the years as a major impact on the town. "They and others have made significant contributions to the town, our parks, our bike trail system." Hanson is proud, in particular, of our parks. "Looking at our park system, the playground here and the facilities around the community center, Rest Lake Park, Koller Park, that's all been upgraded, a pretty significant accomplishment."

### Manitowish Waters Airport

Hanson was drawn into public service and town politics originally because of the MW Airport, which began operating in the late 1940s. "We had moved back up here after we closed the store (Hanson's Hardware) in Minocqua so I had retired," Hanson

recalls. "Some people came to me who weren't very happy with how the airport was being managed. We had an airport commission, and they seemed to be asking for more and more money. Some people were asking when would this end. So, that was the reason that I ran and got elected. The first meeting we had we abolished the airport commission and started a (town) committee, which we still have. And that gave the town board a little bit more control of what was going on over there."

#### Palmer Hanson

Palmer Hanson, John's father, served as town chairman from 1961-1969 and was a profound influence on John. "My dad dedicated his life to public service when he wasn't running his businesses. He was one of the original directors of the Howard Young Hospital when that was formed, the Lakeland Memorial Hospital at the time, and he was on the county board for a long time, was involved in the chamber of commerce and, of course, all of his service on the town board, so he definitely influenced me."

#### Road Management

Beyond the zoning ordinance changes during his tenure, Hanson also cites how the town has changed its management of its roads as a key change. Previously, the 55 miles of town roads used state aid only to improve them. "That first town board I was on, we proposed putting money in the budget for town roads. The quality of our roads is really pretty good. So, of that 55 miles, I think like 50 miles of it is hard surface now, and I think nearly all of it has been re-done in the last 20 years."

And the airport continues to hold Hanson's attention. Today, upgrades are funded by federal (90%), state (5%) and local dollars (5%). "When we built that hangar about 10 years ago, that was a \$575,000 project that cost us \$27,000."

#### Fire Company

In Manitowish Waters, we have a fire company rather than a fire department, meaning that the town contracts services with the fire company, which is independent from the town. That's significant, Hanson notes, because while the town budgets for fire equipment, "most of their equipment is purchased through their fundraising. That's a huge benefit for our tax payers."

#### Other Government Agencies

Part of Hanson's job as town chairman is to maintain relationships with other governmental entities and agencies. "The county and state have been pretty fair with us. The county doesn't have to invest much in us as we are a pretty low maintenance community for them. In terms of the state, we deal mainly with the DNR."

Hanson says that while there have been challenges with the DNR relationship, there are times that we cooperate very well. "One of the plus things we've had with the DNR is they owned Rest Lake Park. So, we had a land-use agreement with them to use it. In order for us to get things done there, it was necessary for us to get title to that property. We talked to the DNR, and they said you have 160 acres off of Highway K that we surround."

The result was a trade, the property off of Highway K for Rest Lake Park. "They said you put two restrictions on that park property. One, it will never be sub-divided. Two, it will be perpetually open to the public. We'll trade you even, which they did. We got \$800,000 worth of property for \$400,000."

#### The Future

Moving forward, there will be many things for Hanson and his eventual successor to focus on. "When you look at what we have here, the airport, the library, the fire company, dealing with the DNR, dealing with the state, economic development, there's a lot that needs to get done and then it has to be managed."