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COMMENTARY

Donn Esmonde: North Collins shines light of democracy

Donn Esmonde

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Thomas Jefferson would be proud of John Mrozek. It would have nothing to do with Mrozek's frizzy, shoulder-length hair, an updated version of the powdered wigs favored by the Founding Fathers. It would have everything to do with Mrozek's Jeffersonian grasp of the term "public servant."

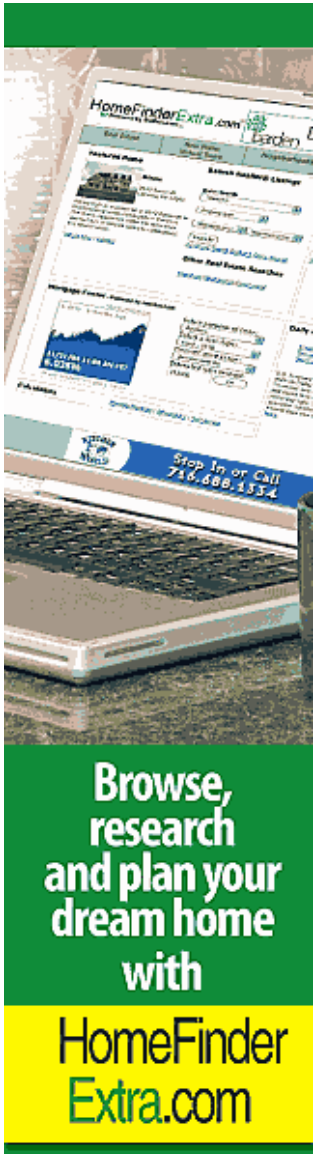
Too many politicians act as kings of their realm, rulers of a domain — including all of the "commoners" within it. Mrozek is the rare elected official who understands who is the boss: not him, but the 1,700 people he serves as village mayor of North Collins. Hence the term public "servant." Not public "ruler."

"It's the people's government," said Mrozek on a recent afternoon, in his office behind the fire station. "We're just the stewards."

Mrozek is a thoughtful, feet-on-the-desk guy who governs when he is not working his day job as a high school guidance counselor. He listens more than he talks. He considers Native American philosophy — how will a decision affect the next seven generations? — in policy matters. He offers the same "Hey there" greeting to a jeans-clad pickup driver and to an urban reporter in a shirt and tie.

Mrozek stands behind the people who elected him. He is not their boss, they are his boss. It is a refreshing attitude that ought to be the rule in government, not the exception. If it were common, more politicians would consider the change Mrozek — and four open-minded village trustees — welcomed at the door: Dissolving the village government and, in so doing, cutting their own jobs.

In most places, town and village officials would rather cut their own throats than cut their cord to power. An inflated sense of self-importance is a common affliction among politicians. Civic leader Kevin Gaughan's current tour of the county's 41 village and town boards, urging each — in the name of cost-saving and common



sense — to cut two seats, has mostly met with chilly-to-frigid response.

Not so in North Collins, a one-stoplight burg with dim memories of better days. Mrozek and the Village Board did Gaughan one better. Why go for a marginal cut in trustees when the larger question is whether it makes sense for the village, sitting within the town's borders, to exist at all?

"Do we really need two governments for 4,000 people?" asked Mrozek. "Does [the village] really need a police force? Does the town need three [volunteer] fire departments?"

Gaughan's recent presentation to the Village Board injected courage into their considerations.

"[Gaughan] helped to spur the moment," said Mrozek. "It was a validation of what we had been talking about."

The need for reform is all around them. Canning factories closed, barber shops shut, vacant storefronts popped up at the village center. Trustee Brenda Bauer-Petrus' 1970 high school graduating class numbered 96. Last year, it was 36.

Causes of decline, in North Collins and elsewhere, go beyond too much government. But slimming its girth is a weapon in our sling.

"This was once a bustling community," said Bauer-Petrus. "This decision is not about [the trustees] or our jobs. It's about what is best for the community."

As public servants, they will not force change down anybody's throat. They will do a study, explore the upside of dissolution, see if the gain outweighs any pain.

"We want people to make an informed decision," said Mrozek. "If [dissolution] happens, it will be something they choose, instead of something forced upon them."

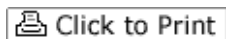
If it works for the people, it works for Mrozek.

Were they still with us, a bunch of guys in powdered wigs would be proud.

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