Written by Carol Pomeday
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Name: Kevin Kowalkowski (Inc.)
Age: 46
Address: 575 Main St.
Family: Married, two children.
Education: Plymouth High School; supervisory management degree from Lakeshore Technical College, Cleveland.
Military Service: U.S. Marine Corps, 1983-1990.
Occupation: Business manager and partner at Hedge Plus LLC, Jackson.
Elected offices: Village President, 2009 to present.
Organizations: Phi Theta Kappa National Honor Society, Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, 2010 Census Committee.

Name: Richard Howells
Age: 56
Address: 237 S. Lar-Ann St.
Family: Married, two children.
Education: Spartan School of Aeronautics for airframe and power plant license, 1982.
Occupation: Retired U.S. Air Force aircraft expediter and production supervisor, served five tours in Middle East and Asia.
Elected offices: None. Member Belgium Tree Board, 2008-2010; chairman, 2009-2010; election poll worker.
Organizations: American Legion Post 412, Belgium Lions Club, National Rifle Association and American Association of Retired People.

Kowalkowski says he made needed changes; Howells criticizes style

Two years ago, Belgium voters decided it was time for a change and elected Kevin Kowalkowski, a newcomer to politics, to lead the village, ousting longtime president Don “Peanuts” Schommer, who died last year of cancer.

Kowalkowski is being challenged by Richard Howells, former Tree Board chairman who says it’s time for another change. Howells is campaigning hard for the job, raising $900 from supporters, speaking to organizations, talking with seniors citizens and scheduling times at Belgium restaurants for residents to meet with him.

If elected, Howells, a retired Air Force aircraft expediter, said he will have weekly office hours for residents to come in and discuss issues over a cup of coffee.

“There are people who say they’ve never met Kevin and don’t know what he looks like,” Howells said. “As president, I think you have to be visible in the community.

“I don’t like the way the village is headed, and I disagree with some of the decisions that were made.”

Kowalkowski said he’s participated in numerous community events, including cleaning up the bike trail, the ribbon-cutting for the ice rink and toured Lakeside Foods new dormitory, but his time is better spent working on village issues.

“I have been through the budgets and I have seen the debt racked up by previous administrations,” he said. “What the village needs is someone in the trenches doing the work. That’s where I have been.”

It’s been an embattled first term for Kowalkowski, who negotiated a severance package for former village clerk Lila Mueller, streamlined village government, oversaw projects to reduce flooding and pushed through the removal of 33 streetlights to save money. When residents complained it was too dark, 10 lights were reinstalled and a solar streetlight may be tried in another dark area.

That was probably his most unpopular cost-cutting move, Kowalkowski said.

“It hasn’t been easy. A lot of things I’ve done didn’t sit well with people,” Kowalkowski said.

“I was naive when I first got in and thought I could make changes quickly. It doesn’t work that way. I wanted village government to operate more like a business and I think that’s being done now with new software and procedures.”

Holding people accountable for their responsibilities is paying off, he said.

“The staff we have here is among the finest you’re going to find in Ozaukee County,” he said. “It was a battle at times, but now the staff is very responsive and willing to be held accountable for their positions. Dan (Birenbaum, public works director) lives for this village. ”

Riding along in a snowplow showed him how important it is to have reliable equipment and why there is a schedule for replacing trucks, Kowalkowski said.

“What those plows go through, wow, but they don’t have to be new each time,” he said.

Developing a budget for next year will be a challenge, he said. It’s estimated the village will lose $7,700 in state funding in 2012, which is 30% less than this year.

“The village does not have the money to do everything it wants to do,” Kowalkowski said. “With the shared revenues that will be slashed, we’ll have to get creative in how we do business here.”

Kowalkowski said he wants to see some important projects that he’s worked on come to fruition.

“Main Street (reconstruction) is the biggest one. At least the groundwork has been laid,” he said.

“The football-soccer complex (at Heritage Park) I feel very strongly about and I want to see that done. We’ve made a lot of strides in I&I (inflow and infiltration of stormwater) and improved situations drastically but more has to be done.”

Having more recreational opportunities for young people is important, Kowalkowski said, and he’s working with organizations to spearhead efforts such as the ice rink.

His new job as business manager and partner for Hedge Plus LLC in Jackson requires more hours, which makes it difficult to attend functions, Kowalkowski said.

“When I have free time, I want to spend it with my kids. I try to be at all their events,” he said.

Howells doesn’t attend Village Board meetings because the Belgium American Legion Post meets the same night and he’s the finance officer. His wife Helen attends and takes notes for him.

“Belgium doesn’t have a single large problem,” Howells said. “It has a million small ones. If elected, I will plug away at them. They may be long-range, but I will do my homework first and see what’s all involved. It’s about accountability and accessibility.

“Communication is one of the biggest things I see lacking, and it’s not just between the Village Board and residents. It’s even with board members. Some trustees have been blind-sided by his decisions.”

Howells said there are 81 businesses in Belgium, ranging from manufacturers to home businesses.

“I’ve gone to most of them and the most common thing I hear is that they don’t know what Kevin looks like,” Howells said. “He hasn’t come to their businesses or organizations.”

Howells said the village should be more active in recruiting businesses to the village, something he wants to do.

“I’m retired. I have the time to give to the village,” he said.

Howells said decisions made while he was on the Tree Board prompted him to get involved at a higher level. He resigned from the Tree Board last year after the Village Board rejected his proposed budget and would not waive the residency requirement so a Town of Belgium resident could be appointed to the Tree Board.