

Brooks to resign as County Board chairman

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
Wednesday, 09 January 2013 19:23 -

Supervisor from Saukville who led once-divided board through nine years of change will step down midterm

Ozaukee County Board Chairman Rob Brooks, who led a board once paralyzed by infighting through nine years of remarkable change in county government, will step down as chairman next month.

Brooks tendered his resignation Friday, Jan. 4, and will hand over the gavel to his successor during the Feb. 6 County Board meeting. He is stepping down from the post he has held since 2004 halfway through his fifth term as chairman but said he intends to complete the last year of his supervisor term.

“I just need to focus more of my time on my businesses,” said Brooks, a Saukville resident who owns a real estate business and several taverns. “This job (chairman) really takes a lot of time.”

Officers of the board are elected by its members, who will choose Brooks' successor.



Rob Brooks

A frontrunner for chairman, Brooks said, is Supr. Lee Schlenvogt of the Town of Port Washington, who is the second-vice chairman of the board.

Schlenvogt said he would rather talk about Brooks' contributions to the county than the likelihood of him becoming the next chairman.

“Rob will tell you exactly what's on his mind and he expects the same from every member of his leadership team,” Schlenvogt said. “Whoever the next chairman is, I hope he or she continues the same progress we've had in this county under Rob instead of going backwards and becoming stagnant.”

Brooks had served just one two-year term on a deeply divided County Board when he was

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elected chairman. At age 38, he became one of the youngest, if not the youngest, chairman, a position historically reserved for senior supervisors.

“Supervisors are tired of the infighting, just like the public is tired of the infighting,” Brooks said at the time.

His goal, he said, was to restore decorum to the board and change the way the board and county government operate.

“I’m not saying we have to cut programs, but we should try to revamp government so we can afford the programs we need,” Brooks said in 2004.

Nine years later, Brooks is chairman of a smaller County Board overseeing a smaller county government.

“When I started as a supervisor, the county probably had 50 to 60 committees and I served on five or six. Now we have a handful of committees and supervisors serve on one,” he said. “We’ve consolidated departments and shrunk our workforce by hundreds of employees.

“I don’t think these reductions came at the cost of important programs, although there are people who disagree with me. We certainly have become more efficient.”

That’s not to say there haven’t been controversial changes during Brooks’ tenure as chairman. Recently, a decision to pare benefits for sheriff’s department jailers led to an exodus of deputies and excessive overtime, according to department officials.

The departure of deputies, Brooks said, isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

“For years we have heard complaints about how there’s no opportunity for advancement in the sheriff’s department,” he said. “Now we have cleaned house, although not intentionally, and the people who remain in the department have plenty of room for advancement.”

Brooks developed a reputation as a hands-on chairman by taking an active role in planning and negotiating major projects. Among these are the construction of Lasata Crossings assisted living facility at the county senior living complex in Cedarburg, ongoing renovations at the County Fairgrounds in Cedarburg and the purchase of land in the Town of Saukville to supply gravel for the county’s asphalt plant.

“When I first got on the board, we weren’t getting things done,” he said. “But at most of the critical junctures after that, we as a board pretty much acted unanimously.”

No shortage of challenges lie ahead for the next chairman, Brooks said.

The county is studying capital improvement projects and a borrowing plan to finance the most important of the projects.

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Lasata Care Center, the county's aging nursing home, needs attention and the board will have to decide whether to renovate or raze and rebuild at least part of the facility, Brooks said.

The board will also need to deal with ongoing issues such as a proposal to consolidate emergency dispatch services in the county and improvements at the fairgrounds, while managing a budget that has suffered from a significant loss of revenue.

"I've tried to balance the interests on the board," Brooks said. "There are supervisors who always want to cut taxes. Then there are those who think taxes should be higher.

"My goal has been to provide the same or better services at less of a cost to taxpayers, and I think we've done that."