Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Incumbent Larson faces Schwister in race for Port's 6th District aldermanic seat

Port Washington Ald. Dave Larson said he's believes the city's heading in the right direction, and he's seeking a third term in office to help shepherd the community as it works to realize its potential.

But newcomer Tim Schwister said he's seen little improvements in the city's 6th District, and he wants to lead the way toward these advancements.

The men will vie for the chance to represent the city's southwest side in the Tuesday, April 3 election.

Schwister, 39, of 1414 Willow Dr., said there's more unemployment in the district than elsewhere in the city, and he wants to work to draw industrial business and jobs to the community.

"I don't think there's enough of an effort to do that right now," he said. "Several of our elected officials are too concentrated on downtown. People need a place to work, then they can shop downtown."

This city's done a good job with the downtown, he said, creating a reasonable business environment there.

The city should provide incentives to businesses to come to the community and fill the many vacant buildings here, Schwister added.

By attracting jobs, he said, the city will also help the struggling housing market and enable people to realize their dream of owning a home.

"I think we should do everything we can to make that dream a reality," Schwister said.

Larson, 45, of 509 Summit Dr., said the city has a great opportunity to redefine downtown with the coming of Duluth Trading Co.

"The city did some really great things to make that happen," he said of the company's decision to open a store downtown. "Now, we have an opportunity to solicit the businesses we want to see there rather than waiting for them to call."

The city should update the marketing study done by the Taurean group to see what businesses would complement the mix downtown, he said, then go after them.

The city's biggest role in downtown development, he said, is to create an environment in

which it's easy to do business. In the past, he said, the city's been seen as an impediment, but that's changing.

As evidence, he pointed to the city's support of plans to renovate the former M&I Bank building.

Tied to the downtown is the lakefront, an area where Larson said the city has made leaps forward.

The south beach "is fabulous," he said, while the north beach is equally nice.

"We've got good access to the north beach," he said, especially since the staircase connecting it to Upper Lake Park was built. "The only thing the city could do, as technology advances, is reduce the footprint of the wastewater treatment plant."

The city's making progress on developing the coal dock, Larson said, noting much of the funding for the infrastructure is coming from grants.

But now, he said, the city has some decisions to make. It has to come up with some creative ways to tie the coal dock to downtown. To do that, Larson said, the city could create a team of people from government and the community to come up with creative options.

The city should also consider updating its development plan for the coal dock, he said, perhaps looking at the potential of a shipwreck museum as considered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is contemplating the creation of a maritime sanctuary off Port's shore.

"I think the NOAA concept would be great," Larson said. "But we need to consider other ideas in case it doesn't happen.

"This (the coal dock) is a big deal. We want that to succeed. Some people are upset it's taken so long, but I'd rather we take the time and do it right."

Schwister said additional environmental impact and seismic studies should be done before anything's developed on the coal dock.

"I would like to see something built on the coal dock, but I don't think it's time yet," he said. "We don't want to build something and have it crumble under our feet. We don't know if it (the coal dock) is stable. It bothers me. We should get the information."

In terms of the lakefront, he said the city has a gem in the north beach but should work to improve access to the south beach and clean it.

"It's a very nice place to go, but it's very inaccessible," Schwister said. "I'd like to see if we

could do something more with the south beach."

He said the city should petition lawmakers to fix the breakwater, even if it means heading to Washington, D.C., to speak to them directly. If that doesn't work, the city should repair the structure, Schwister said.

"It's our responsibility to take care of our city," he said. "If it's a danger, which it is, we should be proactive."

Until it's fixed, the city should consider restricting access to it during storms, Schwister added.

Both Larson and Schwister said that there's little for the city to do right now about the hundreds of acres on the city's south side annexed in 2000 by Brookfield developer Vincent Kuttemperoor, whose ambitious plans for a high-end, multi-use development are unlikely to be realized now that he has lost control of the land.

"I say we should let it sit and wait (for developers to approach the city)," Larson said. "To spend too much time on that right now might be a waste of energy. If we paintourselves in a corner without hearing their ideas, we may miss out on something."

Schwister, who ran unsuccessfully for state Assembly last year, said he is seeking a seat on the Common Council to help make a difference in his district and the community.

"I will be open, honest, forthcoming and always available," he said.

Larson noted that he and his family are involved in the community and in the downtown, where he and his wife work.

"We have a personal interest in the development and growth of the city," he said. "You're going to get the best I have. The decisions I make affect every aspect of my life."

Port redistricting has incumbents competing for same 2nd District post

Voters in Port Washington's 2nd District will have their choice of two incumbents on the April 3 ballot — Paul Neumyer and Burt Babcock.

Neumyer, of 643 N. Milwaukee St., has represented the city's 2nd District since 2007, while Babcock, 221 W. Main St., has represented the 4th District since 1998. They are vying against each other for a seat on the Common Council because a fluke in redistricting placed them in the same district.

“It’s unfortunate we both got stuck running in the same district,” said Neumyer, 57. “Burt’s a nice man. His heart is in the right place. But I feel I know the residents of the 2nd District.”

Babcock, called the situation “unusual,” but said competition is good for the city.

“In a democracy, you should have more than one person running so people have a choice,” he said. “I feel I’ve done a good job for the 4th District.”

He said he would like to work to do an equally good job for the 2nd District.

Overall, Babcock said, his first priority for the city is development of the coal dock infrastructure.

Full development will take time because of the high cost, and it will likely require public-private cooperation, Babcock said, adding a partnership with We Energies could create a demonstration project on energy conservation. He said he would also like to see a community center that incorporates a hall or private shops if it can be done legally.

No matter how it’s done, it’s important that the coal dock be developed in a way that doesn’t require a significant amount of maintenance by the Parks and Recreation Department staff, which is already burdened, Babcock said.

The city should take a look at its parks and determine if they are all needed, added Babcock, a member of the Parks and Recreation Board. If they aren’t, he said, the city should consider selling a few and using the profits to maintain the others.

This will also help keep the city’s taxes down, increase the tax base and avoid layoffs and cuts in services, he said.

“Thirty-six parks is probably more than we really need,” Babcock said.

Neumyer said he understands people are frustrated because the coal dock hasn’t been opened yet, but said the city has a good, workable plan for the area that will be implemented.

“It’s a good plan, and we have to build on it,” he said. “We may have to tweak it.”

The city’s been fortunate to receive a number of large grants to help pay for the infrastructure, Neumyer said, but because of the cost of the full development it may take some time.

One priority should be the construction of restrooms, which would also serve the south beach, Neumyer said.

“That’s something we’re going to have to look at. It will make it a lot more user-friendly,” he said.

The south beach is a gem, Neumyer said, and a tremendous asset along the lakefront. But the city needs to improve the entrance to the north beach, where the bluff regularly slumps and sends mounds of earth over the pathway leading to the sand.

“We don’t know how to address it right now, but we need to look at it,” he said.

Babcock said he would like to see the city be more active on the lakeshore, pushing for cruise ships to visit and for the community to stress efforts to preserve Lake Michigan.

Neumyer said his top priority is to maintain the current level of services and infrastructure in the city even as the budget gets tighter.

“We’re going to have to get creative,” he said. “We’re not catching up with our road repairs, and we have a lot of roads in need of some major repairs.”

The city has to look at its industrial base and work to attract new industry, Neumyer said, while balancing that with commercial and residential development.

Babcock agreed that the city needs to continue to market itself to industry.

“We are a very nice place to live, have a talented workforce and we’ve lost a myriad of jobs,” he said. “With a concerted effort, hopefully we could change that.”

Babcock said he would like to see the city consider a tax incremental financing district for the hundreds of acres that make up the former VK Homes land on the city’s south side.

The city could set the tone for that area when it sells 40 acres of land it owns north of that property, Babcock said.

Neumyer said the city needs to plan for the area before developers buy the land.

“Do we want that in residential use? Do we want it in light industrial use, especially those areas near the industrial park?” he asked. “It may be time to revisit the plan. Developers can tell us what they want to do, but it has to be what the city wants. We need to decide where we’re going there.

“Whatever we do, it has to be integrated with the city. It’s not going to be a stand-alone community. It’s part of the City of Port Washington.”

Both men said the city has done a good job creating a positive environment for business to flourish in downtown.

“It’s been a long, hard struggle but we’re seeing the light at the end of the tunnel,” Neumyer said. “Duluth Trading Co. is going to be a big shot in the arm for downtown. I’m hoping the restaurants and other businesses all benefit from that.”

Babcock said the downtown will also benefit from the renovation of the former M&I Bank project, something he worked hard to ensure would happen.

“To me, it makes no sense to tear the building down if it can be fixed and made useful again,” he said.