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Sometimes, bigger government is better, retired solicitor from Berks County says

A man with more than four decades of experience serving municipalities says it's time to break down some borders and make local government units bigger.

By Erin Negley
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- For nearly 50 years, Norman E. Dettra Jr. was immersed in small-town government, advising municipal officials in several Berks County communities.



Reading Eagle: Tim Leedy

Norman E. Dettra Jr., a longtime figure in municipal circles, is retired with his wife, Nancy, at Phoebe Berks Village in Wernersville.

Norman E. Dettra Jr.

Age: 77

Family: Wife, Nancy, two daughters and three grandsons.

Home: Phoebe Berks Village, Wernersville.

Career: Dettra served as solicitor for Spring Township in 1960, then for Bern, Lower Alsace and Robeson townships, the Kutztown School District and several sewer and municipal authorities. He was appointed a Spring Township supervisor in 2003 and was elected to a new term in 2005. He resigned in December after moving from the township.

Education: Degree in history, Albright College, 1952; law degree, Dickinson School of Law, 1956.

But now, as he reflects on his career, Dettra believes that as far as local government is concerned, bigger might be better.

"The only way we're going to resolve these problems that Berks County is confronted with, in my opinion, is to abolish municipal boundaries and have larger municipal units," said Dettra, a longtime municipal attorney.

"And yet, that's not going to occur very easily because everybody wants to protect his own turf," he added.

Consolidation would lower the cost of government and provide benefits for municipal planning, services and infrastructure.

Dettra, 77, speaks from a wealth of experience.

In a career that began in 1960, he has served as solicitor for Bern, Lower Alsace, Robeson and Spring townships, as well as the Kutztown School District and several municipal authorities.

In December, he resigned his seat as a Spring Township supervisor, his final municipal post.

Dettra stepped down because he and his wife, Nancy, moved from Lincoln Park to Phoebe Berks Village in Wernersville. Glaucoma has robbed Dettra of most of his eyesight, and he also is in the early stages of Parkinson's disease.

"With all of that, I thought it was time to let some younger people bear some of the burdens of local government," he said.

Despite his long career, Dettra said he still hasn't learned patience, but he knows the art of compromise.

"You're confronted with very serious municipal problems, and if everyone is unhappy with the result, then you figure it's been a fair result," he said. "But if one side is very, very happy and the other feels they got a rough deal, you should think about it more before you come to a final resolution."

Dettra was born in Reading. His father was a Methodist pastor and the family moved around southeastern Pennsylvania. He learned the importance of community service at an early age.

"There was always a thought that you gave back more than what you took from the community in which you lived," Dettra said.

After spending time as a leader at the Pottsville YMCA and Camp Conrad Weiser, Dettra thought about becoming a camp director after college.

But a family friend who was involved in politics and Nancy suggested that he try law, and Dettra took their advice.

He went to law school, then set up shop in Shillington, where Nancy had grown up.

"I remembered all of the crime in Reading, and it seemed like a good place to practice law," he said.

Dettra started a practice with a friend and ended up with most of the municipal-related cases. He remembers his first Spring Township meeting in the late 1950s, when he appeared on behalf of clients who wanted the township to pave Lincoln Avenue in their West Wyomissing neighborhood.

The meeting, Dettra said, was held in what he remembers as a horrible atmosphere. To clear space for the meeting, trees were moved from the township garage on Portland Avenue and sawdust was sprinkled over oil spots.

After gaining experience representing clients upset with local government, Dettra decided to try the other side of the table becoming a municipal solicitor. His longest appointment was in Spring Township, which he served for 42 years.

"My personal philosophy as a solicitor was to keep the township out of court, and therefore, we attempted to resolve on amicable basis when possible and only use litigation as a last resort," he said.

For decades, he attended municipal meetings Monday through Thursday all over Berks County, often dealing with issues development and growth.

Spring Township, for example, grew from a Reading suburb of 8,000 residents in 1960 to a community of 26,000 now – second only to Reading for population in Berks.

And while growth could have caused huge problems for municipalities, Dettra and other leaders worked to improve local governments.

"The thinking was that we could get a lot done if we would spread the cost of local government from the backs of the general public to the developer," he said. "For example, streets were no longer paid by the township, but they were paid for by the developer. That brought considerable savings to the township. At that time, it was rather radical."

Dettra stepped down as Spring's solicitor in 2002 and became a supervisor the following year because he felt he owed it the community to share his knowledge.

Spring Supervisor John Dallas, who also serves on the planning commission, considered Dettra a mentor in municipal law. He also appreciated Dettra's wit and dry humor.

Dallas said Dettra knows the township history and can discuss background on any issue.

"That knowledge can never be repeated," Dallas said. "That's only gained through years of living."

Spring supervisors recently named Dettra's replacement, appointing William J. Collins Jr. to fill his seat on the board.

"He left a void," Dallas said of Dettra, "and it will take a while for anyone to fill his shoes."

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