

As much as I am excited for my successor to lead our community as mayor, and our mostly intact common council to serve the citizens of Warsaw for another term, I am a bit disheartened. For the first time in over forty years, there are no contested races and there will be no municipal election in Warsaw. Let's be clear, however, that this is not just a Kosciusko County problem. In the 2023 local races across the state, there were a higher than usual number of uncontested municipal elections.

The purpose of today's column is to address the challenges we face as a community to attract the next generation of local leaders that will guide our community into the future. Quite simply, who are those leaders, where do we find them, and how do we encourage them to get involved?

It seems as if public discourse has been replaced by the disinformation campaigns that are so easy to wage with the click of mouse. Are young leaders choosing to avoid politics altogether because of the toxicity of social media and the distortions of cable news shows? I don't think so. Our young professionals understand how communications work and for the most part, take it for what it is worth.

To find future leaders, we need to look no further than in our workplace, neighborhoods, churches, and community groups.

It was over twenty-seven years ago that I took a call from Warsaw Mayor Jeff Plank who was recruiting me to fill a vacancy on the Plan Commission. I'll never forget how persuasive he was, encouraging me to give back to a community that had given so much to me. "It's only one meeting a month and besides, the Plan Commission is where all the action is!" he said. I was age forty at the time. I had four young children, was growing my optometry practice, and didn't know the first thing about city zoning or comprehensive plans. But the premise of giving back to the community stuck with me. I said yes.

A few years later, in an effort to replace yet another vacancy on that same Plan Commission, Mayor Plank made a similar call to another citizen. His effort was again successful, and like me, that is how Mayor-elect Jeff Grose got his start in city government. I think he was in his thirties at the time.

Warsaw has no shortage of thoughtful, diverse young professionals whose collective focus is to better our community. Leaders tend to stand out and aren't generally too hard to identify. The critical step is to engage those young leaders and challenge them to get involved. Vital to the development of future leaders is the self-confidence that will blossom by extending an invitation to serve on a community board, chairing a service club committee, or leading a not-for-profit initiative,

By acknowledging and respecting new faces and ideas, healthy public discourse is cultivated, and promising solutions are developed.

Believe me, it can create quite a ripple effect.