

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Dane County Progressives Win Again on Zoning

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As a four-time incumbent on the five-member Middleton Town Board, Tim Roehl had reason to feel confident heading into the spring election earlier this month. He was vice president of the Wisconsin Towns Association and had helped convince the Legislature to pass a bill allowing towns to opt out of Dane County zoning rules.

Roehl and incumbent Town Chairman Bill Kolar also were unopposed on the April 4 ballot.

But much to the shock of their friends and supporters, Roehl and Kolar lost to two progressive write-in candidates. Roehl fell to former town board member Richard David Oberle, while Kolar lost to Cynthia Richson. The winners amassed a little more than 1,400 votes out of more than 4,700 voters in the town of Middleton.

"I am so happy for the citizens of the town of Middleton," Richson said. "Their voice has finally been heard, listened to and respected."

But how did the write-in candidates pull it off? The lesson for moderates and conservatives in liberal Dane County may be that they need to vote in spring and local elections, not just in major elections for governor and president.

Roehl touted the town's excellent bond rating -- the best in the state -- during his latest campaign. He was also feeling good about the two tax cuts on his watch.

But progressives feared that opting out of Dane County zoning would lead to too much development.

"It was all the misleading information," Roehl said.

Dane County progressives said Roehl supported legislation to deny the town's citizens the right to vote on whether to opt out of zoning rules. Roehl counters that citizens were always going to vote on the question April 18, and they did at the annual meeting. The vote was 352-29 against withdrawing from shared zoning responsibilities with the county government. Only if and when Dane County does a comprehensive rewrite of its zoning rules can town boards alone vote to opt out.

Roehl says the reason he supported a legislative amendment to take the word "annual" out of annual meeting is that five towns had not gone through the opt-out process in time to vote on the question in 2017. That's why he supported a "30-day noticed" special meeting to be the rule so those five towns could vote this year.

As for progressive fears of urban sprawl and a giant shopping center going up in the town, Roehl says it would never happen. The town is not zoned for that. It's a myth progressives used as a scare tactic, according to Roehl.

As for his own voters, Roehl says, "I would go door to door, and they would say, 'Why are you even campaigning?' It's a write-in campaign, Tim. You are unopposed.'" He says several friends came up to him at a restaurant recently and apologized for not voting.

In the end, the long-standing belief in centralized zoning rules over property rights and local control still drives progressives to organize and vote. More moderate to conservative voters often don't know why they need to vote until after the votes are counted.

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