

Opinion

Marshall deserves our thanks

If you see Kent Marshall, and given his busy schedule that may be unlikely anytime soon, but if you do see him tell him "Thank you."

Marshall recently resigned from the West Central Area School Board after having served 15 years, most of it as chairperson. "It was time," he said simply when asked why he decided to give up the job.

Newcomers to the area probably can't understand what our schools were like 15 years ago, when Marshall was first elected to the old Barrett School Board. What is now the West Central Area School District consisted of three separate school districts in five separate communities: Hoffman-Kensington, Barrett, and Elbow Lake-Wendell.

Each of these three districts were hurting for students, had dilapidated facilities, and faced bleak futures. Barrett and Elbow Lake-Wendell had signed a cooperative agreement and were sharing facilities, and talks were ongoing with Hoffman-Kensington as well. But joint school board meetings, of 25 members, were chaotic, and often without direction.

It took the bold leadership of Marshall, and others, to get these separate and different communities all pulling in the same harness, towards the same goal. School districts had to be consolidated, something that never goes easy in rural Minnesota, levy referendums had to be passed, a site for a new secondary school selected, state funding secured and a building levy referendum passed.

Anyone who was around during those times in the early 1990's will recall that coffee shop conversions seldom were about anything other than school politics.

Once funding was secured, and the building referendum passed, some present school buildings had to be closed, including Marshall's own home town school in Barrett. The old Elbow Lake-Wendell High School Building was torn down, and the entire Hoffman school building sold.

These were emotional times for anyone who grew up attending these venerable institutions, just look at back issues of this newspaper and its "Letters to the Editor" pages to see what I mean. It usually fell on Kent Marshall, as board chairperson, to explain the how and why of things to the public, either through the televised school board meetings, or at the dozens of public meetings held during those years.

What is truly amazing is that when the smoke cleared, what emerged was an educational institution that is the envy of the state. Indeed, the formation of the WCA school district has been used as a model by the Minnesota School Board Association for school districts in similar situations.

It took vision, perseverance, and at times, a mighty thick skin, to be the WCA school board chair during these past 15 years. But even more, it took a unswerving commitment to the betterment of our communities, all of our communities, a love of education, and above all, a love of children, all of our children.