

Just Call Him “Mr. President”

In addition to a distinguished career in structural engineering, Mike West also has served as an elected public official for more than a dozen years.

IF YOU KNOW MICHAEL A. WEST, P.E., it's probably through attending one of his presentations at NASCC: The Steel Conference, where he has been a presenter nine of the years since 1989. Or perhaps you know him as the author of “Reviewing Shop Drawings,” published in *MSC* in March 2003. Or you might recognize his name from *AISC Steel Design Guide No. 3, Serviceability Design Considerations for Low-Rise Buildings*, or *Steel Design Guide No. 10, Erection Bracing of Low-Rise Structural Steel Buildings*, both of which he co-authored with his colleague at Computerized Structural Design, James Fisher, P.E., Ph.D.

But if you live about eight miles north of Milwaukee and are one of the 6,000 or so people who call Fox Point, Wis., home, you probably know West as “Mr. President.” He has served as a village trustee for 12 years and for the last nine years has also been the Fox Point village president.

“I don't think there's ever been a time where I have not been interested in government, politics and history,” West said, crediting much of that interest to his high school civics teacher, Father Crowley. “They're not the same, of course, but they're really intertwined.”

In the late 1990s when an architect client told him how he recently had become a trustee in his home community, West thought that sounded like a good idea for someone with his interests. When an opportunity arose in Fox Point, where he has now lived for more than two decades, West stepped forward and was appointed to fill the vacancy. He subsequently ran for the seat in the next election and was elected.

Then in 2001 when the village president decided not to run for reelection, West ran for that seat and was elected. “And once you learn how to do that job—because there is no training program—you say to yourself, ‘I've invested all this

time, and now I have the skills; I should use them.’” And he has.

Much to his delight, the position has given West an insider's look at the details behind the big picture of how both government and infrastructure work.

West notes that although it's no surprise, it is interesting how differently public and

private projects and processes work. “In the private sector, if you're a consulting engineer and you want to work with somebody, you go and see if you can get a job with them on a one-to-one basis. But in the public sector it's open and you're dealing with *everyone*, and everybody gets to be heard. In the private sector, people can't walk into your office and just start talking to you, but in the public sector it really is democracy.”

Because everybody gets to have a say, his role at times is very interactive. “In our community everybody participates; they all come to meetings. We have public comment periods at meetings, citizens call me at home; they write me letters. It's real democracy, just like Thomas Jefferson envisioned it.”

Going along with that West says perhaps the most important single qualification for a role like village president is patience. “You have to have the patience to hear everybody out,” he says. “You don't prejudge or prequalify anybody.”

Even so, he says, not everybody gets what they want. “If we have an issue and a dozen very involved and concerned citizens come and speak to us, we sometimes don't do what they suggest. And that sometimes surprises them. The reason is that we represent all 6,000 citizens of Fox Point. We listen to the folks who come to present, but we weigh everything and have to figure out what the 5,988 folks that didn't come are thinking.”

“When you make decisions,” West says, “you have to base them on research, good questions and conscientious decision-making. Once you do that, you get the point where you're comfortable with the decision you're making. If the people observe that you're conscientiously listening to them and researching things, they will by and large accept the decisions that you make. It is an interesting process.”

Should more engineers become involved in this activity? West's answer is an emphatic yes. “The skill set that you get as an engineer—educationally, in practice and in professional registration—these three aspects are very helpful to the community. And it's not necessarily in purely engineering matters. Our community hires engineers to do our design work, but what I'm really talking about are the analytical skills and decision-making skills—being able to weigh multiple alternatives and find the best way through to the solution that folks can understand, because it's their money.”

You can read more about West's activity in Fox Point via the *Fox Point-Bayside Patch*, a local online news service, at <http://foxpoint.patch.com>. You can also see and hear West talk about his village in a short video on the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* website at <http://bit.ly/tyMRiO>. **MSC**



Sarah Worthman, Fox Point-Bayside Patch

◀ West in his role as president of the village of Fox Point, Wis.