

Cumberland mayor honored by archdiocese

CUMBERLAND - In a small Western Maryland town whose residents pride homegrown leadership, Mayor Lee Fiedler knows he is probably one of the unlikeliest persons to hold Cumberland's top job at City Hall.

Born and raised in Ohio, the parishioner of St. Patrick in Cumberland came to the city in the early 1990s as president and CEO of the Kelly Springfield Tire Company - a post that took him out of town four days a week.

But after he retired from Kelly in 1999, despite his short Cumberland roots, the Buckeye native was persuaded to take a shot at the mayor's office when a group of citizens including former Maryland Speaker of the House Casper Taylor Jr. asked him to run.

Rather than hurting him, Mayor Fiedler's "outsider" status proved an asset to voters looking for change. Elected in 2000 and reelected twice, he has since cultivated a reputation for seeking input from all sectors of the community.

The mayor has cooperated very closely with religious leaders to improve senior housing. He has also led the revitalization of downtown and has become one of the loudest cheerleaders for this proud capital city of Allegany County.

Even as he works in City Hall, Mayor Fiedler serves the community as a part-time business professor at Frostburg State University and as president of the school board of Bishop Walsh School in Cumberland.

In recognition of his service, Bishop W. Francis Malooly, western vicar, presented the mayor with the Archdiocesan Medal of Honor in a June 16 ceremony at St. Patrick. The recognition is bestowed to clergy, religious and laity for their outstanding service to the archdiocese and their respective parishes or institutions.

Sitting in his office at City Hall, Mayor Fiedler discussed his distinctive approach to leadership with The Catholic Review. He also reflected on his unlikely path to

political office and the role of his Catholic upbringing in helping him become a leader.

Involve the people

Changing the political culture in Cumberland was a major goal when Mayor Fiedler first came to office.

“Good ideas don’t come from only one or two people,” he explained. “What we have done historically in City Hall is told the community what they needed. We changed that so these community groups now come and tell City Hall what they need.”

With a population of about 22,000, a large percentage of which is made up of seniors, Mayor Fiedler said there was a critical need to provide better housing. One of the first programs he developed grew out of discussions with Monsignor Thomas Bevan, his pastor, and several other religious leaders. Many senior houses have been built, with other projects under consideration.

“We talked about putting together a program that would build one-story homes so seniors would be able to sell their homes and use most or all of it to pay for what they buy in this new program,” Mayor Fiedler explained. “They are low-cost, one-story homes.”

New housing hasn’t been targeted solely for seniors. Noting that the first year he became mayor there was only one new house that had been erected in Cumberland, the mayor said there are now more than 100 houses under construction for people of all income levels. The city, which has improved its infrastructure, has also encouraged homeownership with a program that turns over formerly run-down homes to families who put in the sweat equity to improve them.

“We’re turning over homes to families who have never owned homes before,” Mayor Fiedler said.

The Cumberland leader said he was particularly proud of improvements downtown. He pointed out that seven years ago, there were 26 empty buildings on Main Street. Today, they are all filled as the downtown has become more of an arts and entertainment district.

“When you look at the health of the city, I think working with ideas from all sides is really beneficial,” he said.

Mayor Fiedler said he has benefited from Cumberland’s non-partisan election system. Candidates don’t run as Republicans or Democrats, he said.

“You work better with everyone and preconceived ideas don’t get in front of you,” he said.

Faith and leadership

As a graduate of Catholic elementary and high schools in Ohio, Mayor Fiedler credits the hardworking nuns for preparing him for a successful business and political career. They taught him discipline, he said, and gave him a solid academic grounding.

In addition to himself, three of Mayor Fiedler’s five siblings became CEOs – a feat that was featured highlighted by Tom Brokaw on the NBC Nightly News.

“We had good teachers who knew their business,” said Mayor Fiedler, who graduated from Kent State University in Ohio with degrees in chemistry and mathematics.

While he only intended to stay in office for one term, he decided to stay on longer because of the pace of change.

“In business, you can make a decision and it gets done,” he said with a laugh. “In government, it’s slower. It takes a long time to get things done.”

Even though many people have encouraged him to run for higher office, the mayor said he is happy in his post. He loves his adopted town, he said.

“What strikes you is that Cumberland is a city of many churches and steeples,” he said. “It’s part of the backbone of our community. It’s a wonderful place to live.”