

DISMAL AS A CANDIDATE, DENISON WINS SOME FANS IN OFFICE

By Dan Sugarman

On the morning of November 8, 2006, Jon Denison learned that he had become Northfield's new city councilor for the 4th ward. In a close race that wasn't decided until after he'd gone to sleep, Denison squeaked past his opponent, Victor Summa, by a mere 49 votes.

The strange thing was, Denison had never really campaigned. He hadn't attended any public candidate forums, nor had he responded to questions from the Northfield News about his policies, initiatives or ideas. Shocked by Northfield's selection of such an unknown quantity, resident activist Tracy Davis went to the Internet to voice her dissatisfaction. In a post on LocallyGrownNorthfield.org, a community blog that receives thousands of visits each day, Davis bewailed Denison's election:

“Last night's election results in the Fourth Ward, on the City's west side, were shameful,” Davis wrote. “Jon Denison, a candidate who didn't campaign, didn't show up at public meetings, didn't speak, write, or communicate positions on any issues, received a winning percentage over candidate Victor Summa, who has repeatedly demonstrated deep and sincere (albeit sometimes loud and annoying) concern for our community, and amply shown a willingness to work hard at making it better.”

It was an inauspicious start for a new city councilman. Then only 34-years-old, with unruly blond hair he sometimes wore down to his shoulders, Denison had some bonafides to prove on several fronts.

‘HONESTLY IMPRESSED’

And yet, only two years later, Denison has emerged as a prominent player in Northfield politics, having won over critics like Davis (who has been “honestly impressed” by Denison, she told the *Northfield News*) while pushing forward an agenda of restoring trust in Northfield's government and serving the interests of Northfield's blue collar residents.

Denison came to city council determined to change the face of Northfield

politics. Nowhere is this more visible than with the prominent role he played in the battle over Northfield's new municipal liquor store. The city council had been debating the site of a new municipal liquor store for years before Denison was on council. Finally, it seemed that they had their site: a new property at 600 Division St., a vacant lot across the street from the Econofoods grocery store.

The only problem, however, was that the property belonged to Northfield Mayor Lee Lansing's son, David Lansing. And while Denison, along with the rest of the city council, voted to go forward with pursuing a lease or purchase agreement for the property, he stood out on the council by telling the mayor that he hoped the proposal failed the criteria test for development. The deal just "seemed fishy," Denison said.

MAYOR'S SON

As it turned out, that simple protest became something of a turning point in Northfield's political history. Noah Cashman, another councilman, had also voiced similar concerns about the liquor store property deal. As a result of these concerns being raised, the city hired an independent investigator to look into ethical conflicts with the property.

Ultimately, the investigator concluded that Denison and Cashman's suspicions were indeed justified, reporting that Mayor Lansing "exerted improper influence so the City's municipal liquor store would become a tenant at 600 Division St. The fact the City did not ultimately enter into a lease or purchase agreement with the Mayor's son does not detract from the conclusion that Mayor Lansing acted inappropriately during the development and site selection process."

Another illuminating moment from Denison's first two years in office was his opposition to a rental ordinance to impose a 20 percent density limit on rental properties in Northfield. Under this ordinance, no more than 20 percent of any Northfield block could be rental properties. Denison felt the limit discriminated against college students who need to live in crowded quarters to save money.

DEAD MAN'S CURVE

The ordinance ultimately passed, but Denison's fight against it brought it to

the attention of both the media and college students. In February 2008, the Northfield News reported: "A few months into enforcement of the new rental ordinance, the potential ripple effects are beginning to show." The future for renters was bleak, the paper said, with "fewer and more expensive options." Denison believes the controversial ordinance will be readdressed by the new council, which begins on January 1, 2009.

But Denison's proudest accomplishment, he says, is one that is closely linked to own biography -- the construction of a new sidewalk on the east side of Lincoln Street, leading to the Greenvale School, which he attended as a youth. Within his first six months in office, Denison advocated for the sidewalk so that children like him could walk to school without negotiating a sidewalk-free stretch of pavement he calls "dead man's curve."

The sidewalk cost \$30,000 more than it would have cost to build on the west side of the street. But Denison saw that the east side was the smarter side to build, because it was contiguous to three apartment complexes and a trailer park, which meant that many children would be using it.

MOM'S TEARS

"Kids don't go where you want them to go," Denison noted. So he brought the sidewalk issue to the city council and won the vote.

His mom had tears in her eyes the first time she walked on it, Denison said.

Denison was born in Northfield in 1972, a third-generation resident of the city. He attended Northfield High School and then moved to Ft. Lauderdale, FL to attend the Art Institute of Ft. Lauderdale. But he dropped out one year before graduating.

Prior to serving on city the council, Denison had spent time as a grocery order selector for the Northfield branch of McLane Minnesota, a large company with 37 total grocery and foodservice distribution centers. And while Denison was spending his time ordering groceries for them, he was also thinking about politics. He ran unsuccessfully for school council in 2001, and then for city council in 2004.

In 2004, Denison's political fortunes improved. He launched a dark horse campaign for Northfield's vacant city council position representing the

fourth ward. Denison says he put his name on the ballot for 4th Ward councilman “essentially... because I could.” Then he just hoped for the best—literally, just hoped. Tending to a mother who was ill with lung cancer, Denison found virtually no time to campaign, beyond shaking a few hands after attending church services with her.

BLUE COLLAR

Facing off against Victor Summa, a longtime Northfield activist, Denison’s chances at victory seemed dim. But on election night, after a long delay in results reporting owing to computer errors, Denison emerged victorious.

While the attacks from the blogosphere came swiftly, Denison countered by holding a town hall meeting to introduce himself to his constituents and then working hard to show them that they had made the right choice.

Denison believes his style resonates with the city’s voters.

His “common blue collar sense” connects, he says, with Northfield citizens who don’t feel like they have someone fighting for them at City Hall. He describes Northfield as ridden by class division, with the affluent suburban families on one hand and the working class set in the other.

“My father wasn’t a college professor,” Denison says. “I don’t own a small business downtown, I don’t have kids that play soccer or hockey. I don’t run in those circles.”

WHO KNEW?

“Before coming here to meet with you, I was hanging out at the local Eagle’s Club,” Denison said. “It’s kind of a Cheers attitude there, everybody knows your name. And I represent that kind of group.”

But has Denison quieted the critics?

“I had a citizen come up to me say they voted me,” Denison said. “Their exact words were, ‘Whoever knew you’d be so damn good at this?’”

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