

Run for Soil Commissioner

Regular readers of this column (Hi, mom!) will recall that –in addition to my real job - I am a Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District (JCSWCD) Commissioner. It's a lofty position that few people even know exists, even though it's on the November ballot every even-numbered year. It's usually near the bottom - about the same place you would expect to find candidates for dogcatcher, if we elected one.

I originally ran for the job in 2002 as a joke, because I got a hold of an early absentee ballot and realized that nobody had filed nomination papers by the deadline so a write-in candidate was going to win. At the time, I didn't know what a Soil and Water Commissioner was or did (or that it was unpaid), but I liked the idea of being a Commissioner of something.

I figured that if I won, I would insist that people call me by my title instead of my name. For example, "There's a call for you on line three, Mr. Commissioner," or "It's your turn to clean the cat's litter box, Mr. Commissioner."

For all I knew, Commissioners had badges and guns like U.S. Marshals, breaking down doors and slapping handcuffs on vicious water and soil wasters. They probably bossed people around, had big offices and drew fat paychecks that no doubt accompanied such a dangerous and prestigious occupation. That's for me!

So I declared my candidacy in a column that appeared a few days before Election Day, 2002. A week later, the Auditor's office called to give me the good news – out of 1073 ballots cast, I was the big winner with a grand total of 32. I never did find out who all of the other votes went to.

The other four commissioners at that time were concerned (for some reason) that I might not be taking the job seriously, but having received such an overwhelming mandate from the voters I felt compelled to give it a whirl.

It certainly has been quite an education for me. In over 50 years of living in Iowa City, I had seldom strayed off the turf grass or concrete. Once you get past the city limits, well, it's dirty out there. The air smells funny. The bathrooms are rather far apart. You could get bitten by a rabid gopher.

But I got used to it. For the record, the JCSWCD is arguably doing more to ensure clean streams and lakes in our county (and across the country) than anyone else. We deal with soil erosion and water quality problems due to runoff into creeks and rivers.

Farmers are the primary clients, although we are concentrating more and more on urban runoff issues. Matching state or federal funds can almost always be found to help pay for whatever solutions our soil technicians feel are appropriate.

Anyway, two of the current five commissioners will not be running this fall, so this is your big chance to pad your resume with an impressive title and help improve our little corner of the world as well. If you have an interest in conservation issues and can attend a meeting or two per month, this may be for you.

For some reason state law prohibits two citizens from the same township from serving at the same time, so if you are from Union, Newton or West Lucas townships you'll have to wait your turn. The rest of you – if you can fog a mirror with your breath – are probably sufficiently qualified to run.

This is especially true if you are female or a member of a minority group. Statewide, commissioners are 85% male, 100% white, and usually age 50 or older. That's a typical Iowa farmer demographic, although Johnson County is unique - it has had a female SWCD majority pretty consistently for at least 10 years.

Speaking of elections, the June 3rd Democratic primary will probably decide the races for Supervisor and Auditor again. No Republican ever wins – and seldom even runs for those offices - in this, the People's Republic of Johnson County. Absentee ballots are already available.

You can vote early at the Auditor's office, and while you're there – what the heck - pick up a nomination petition for JCSWCD. If you can find at least 25 registered voters with low enough standards to sign your form by August 25th, your name will be on the ballot this November. If there are only two names on the ballot, you both will win (if you're not both from the same township, remember?).

What do you have to lose? Make friends, influence people and help save your planet. And don't worry - I'll tell you where to watch out for those rabid gophers.

Dave Parsons is a local businessman, Chair of the Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District and a member of the Press Citizen Writers Group.