

□ PEOPLE

# Scrappy politician now faces fight for life against cancer

*Former Deseronto mayor never one to back down*

By Jack Evans

The Intelligencer

DESERONTO — Citizenship, for former Deseronto mayor John R. Neal, means more than buying a lot and building a house, as he did here in 1955. For him, it means getting involved.

It can also mean a lot of political scraps, as Neal can attest. But after many of those, during his 23 years as a public official, Neal is now fighting for his life against cancer.

"I gave it my best shot," said Neal, of his political career, "and I was proud of it all," he said in an interview from his Belleville General Hospital bed recently before being sent home.

"It took a long time to win just about anything," he recalls, referring to many battles he lost, and others that took years to win.

Specifically, he was referring to his campaign against the central county board of education, which came into being when he was a school trustee for the former Deseronto board.

That was his first job, on top of being a full-time lineman with Bell Canada out of the Belleville office. Later, there came a central board decision to close the Deseronto high school, which Neal also fought with gusto — and lost.

During many of his years as a school trustee and council member, he was also active in the Boy Scout movement.

He recalls when the former Sheller Globe bus factory moved into Deseronto, giving the community a much-needed spurt of growth and prosperity. But hard times later claimed that plant.

But there was one battle he won — only he wasn't on council at the time to share in the credit.

In the early 1970s, the Minis-



John R. Neal

try of the Environment had an agreement with the town to install a new sewage treatment and water filtration plant complex for a total cost of \$1,338,000, paying one-third of the cost, and leaving the local users with an annual bill of \$90.

Because of cost over-runs during construction, the ministry finally sent the Deseronto customers an increase of three times that originally budgeted.

Neal, as mayor then, fought the bill for several years, rejecting even compromise deals that still were sharply higher.

Stormy public meetings occurred over the ensuing years, with Neal enlisting the help of the provincial Liberals to seek to embarrass the reigning Conservatives into a better deal.

"It's their mistake — let them write it (the extra costs) off," he was quoted as saying at one meeting.

Neal was defeated around 1982 and decided it was time to retire from politics, but a few years later, the town and the ministry finally settled, on an arrangement which was mutually acceptable and on a basis Deseronto residents could afford, compared to earlier offers.

And he points to his strong stand against the county-wide board of education as something time has vindicated. "Look at what has happened to our education system and costs — totally out of control," he told a friend recently.

And while serving as mayor for about six years (a further eight years on council) Neal had one other challenge. During the day he was a worker and union steward with Bell Canada, taking orders, and, again, from time to time, fighting on behalf of his fellow workers. But after hours, he was mayor, a chief administrator.

He admits the changing of hats was one of his more difficult tasks during those years, "but I had a job to do and I did it."

He also remains grateful to the support his wife, Mary Lou gave him through election campaigns and in between with many extra time commitments, and the help of other family members, a son, daughter and four grandchildren.

And during those years he made many friends, such as former council member Clarence Zieman.

Zieman recalls some of the many accomplishments of the town council during Neal's tenure, and sums him up as one of those individuals "that quietly go about their business and get the job done."

"The community is pulling for him," Zieman says.

Neal actually spent most of his early life in Belleville, and would have stayed, but could not find a suitable lot when it came time to build, so moved to Deseronto.

Intell Aug. 12/92  
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