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Chairman just one of the boys

By CHRIS SHANAHAN
 Community Editor

Gary Herrema calls it the "cultural centre," but most others probably know it better as the Texas Burger.

By any name, the fast-food restaurant in downtown Uxbridge serves as the daily starting point for the gregarious chairman of fast-growing Durham Region.

On a typical weekday morning, Mr. Herrema milks a few dairy cows at his Uxbridge Township farm, then heads out shortly before 8 a.m. to make a brief stopover at the establishment where he and other Texas Burger boys like to congregate.

"This is my once-a-day hang-out. I call this the Uxbridge cultural centre," he said recently between gulps of coffee at the Main St. North eatery. "If people want to meet me, they know they can come in here at 8 a.m. and find me."

It's during the 15 or 20 minutes before he heads to regional headquarters in Whitby that the 49-year-old politician feels the pulse of the people. His Texas Burger discussions are not high-level boardroom stuff, but down-to-earth discussions between himself and fellow townfolk like Bill Hickling, 78, and Jay Merrick, 66. Mr. Herrema can meet people quickly and hear their concerns more readily than in a more formal setting.

The affable Dutchman has been a regular customer there for about 10 years, during which time he has gabbed with everyone from Ontario's High Commissioner to England, to Supreme Court Justices.

It must be something about the Texas Burger's small-town atmosphere that makes it such a popular meeting place where, according to Mr. Herrema, "everyone feels at home."

Informal

And nothing seems to phase the easy-going Herrema, even a quip from a waitress about how "Gary must be running for something" based on the media attention he's commanding this particular morning. He just shrugs it off with a chuckle and moves on to his next impromptu conversation — this time with a local realtor interested in how a development proposal is progressing.

"We discuss everything from subdivisions to the weather," claimed Mr. Herrema, adding that one of Uxbridge's largest residential developments — Testa Heights — grew out of discussions conducted in the Texas Burger's friendly confines.

A former mayor of Uxbridge Township, Mr. Herrema is serving his third term in the regional chair. He's as yet undecided about his immediate political future, but is considering a few options including another attempt to win a federal seat (He ran unsuccessfully in 1984 as the Liberal candidate for Ontario riding).

For now, Mr. Herrema's time is occupied with major regional issues like development of a waste incinerator and regional



Uxbridge's 'cultural centre'

Gary Herrema (left) catches up on the latest Uxbridge happenings with Texas Burger buddies Jay Merrick and Bill Hickling (right) before starting his day as chairman of Durham Region. The Uxbridge

airport, plus Hwy. 407 alignment. The chairman earns \$58,000 a year in his role as Durham's "political administrator," coordinating the needs and wants of all the region's member municipalities.

He said he's happy at his present post, but would like to have stayed on as mayor of his home municipality longer than the two years he served.

"I've enjoyed being chairman but I would have enjoyed being mayor (of Uxbridge Township) a little longer," he said.

Mr. Herrema doesn't seem disturbed by the fact he earns as much as \$14,000 less than Eldred King, his counterpart in neighboring York Region.

"I'm still trying to catch up to Eldy. I've been trailing him for 30 years," he laughed, noting that his salary is supposed to be increased to bridge this gap.

'No-nonsense'

Gary Herrema has earned the respect of various political colleagues, including fiery former Uxbridge Township Mayor Bill Ballinger.

"His reputation as far as getting things done speaks for itself. He's no-nonsense and unconventional," according to Mr. Ballinger, who worked with the chairman on projects such as the location of a Tokai of Canada lighter

Township resident uses his morning coffee shop visits to hear residents' concerns and opinions on a variety of topics.

— Chris Shanahan

Mayor Gerri Lynn O'Connor. "I think he (Mr. Herrema) is a tremendous public relations person for the region."

"He'll talk to anybody. If you're a ditch-digger and you have a problem he'll help you as much as he would the president of General Motors."

She also noted how Mr. Herrema maintains an extremely busy work schedule, attempting to attend all the many functions to which he's invited.

Following a full work day, the chairman usually heads for some evening function where he appears on behalf of the region, according to Mayor O'Connor.

"This way, he feels the pulse of each community," she said.

Even on weekends, Mr. Herrema is likely to be found taking part in a wide variety of community events. As an announcer for Uxbridge's annual Demolition Derby, he once drew mixed fan reaction by instructing competitors in a women's powder puff event to "drive just like you're in the Zehr's parking lot."

When he can find time from a busy schedule, Mr. Herrema helps run his family dairy operation along with wife Helen, sons Ron, 25, Howie, 21, and daughter Beth, 22, who is also a top law student at the University of Western Ontario.

Community Calendar
 ...C/13

Sport Shop Opens
 ...C/10

Friend In Meade
 ...C/11

Food Business Booming....C/3