

Cooler heads need to prevail in Central Lake

It's unusual for most Antrim County villages or townships to attract standing room only crowds except for those rare occasions when really

SIDE BAR



John Tarrant

“hot-button” issues are on the agenda. But in Central Lake, it seems as though every village council meeting so far this year has attracted a full house. Walter Russell, the village president elected last November, is the star attraction. His unorthodox behavior in running council meetings and conducting village business, interspersed with reported confrontations

with at least one village employee and others outside the confines of the village office, have people showing up at council meetings demanding his resignation, threatening recall and generally hurling less than complimentary remarks in his direction.

The village's May meeting held this past Monday evening was no exception. Well, maybe a little more boisterous than usual, because this time, on top of everything else, people were angry over Russell's recent firing of the village clerk. As it turns out, he apparently can't arbitrarily fire the clerk, but can suspend her pending a public hearing, after which, the full council will make the decision as to whether or not she stays fired. That will be interesting.

I think many in the audience were very much surprised when a motion to not accept the resignation of council member and president pro-tem, Brian Patton, was voted down by a vote of four to two I know I was. Russell then asked council member Bill Chapman if he would accept the position of president pro-tem. When Chapman asked what would be required of him, Russell replied, “Nothing. Just show up.” If that remark had been made by any other village president in Antrim County, it would have generated a few good natured chuckles, but considering the fact that Patton had resigned because he had been carrying the heavy load for the village president, the remark drew jeers and catcalls.

One member of the village council went so far as to tell Russell that progress for the village is stalled because “we're running around cleaning

up your messes,” and a member of the audience shouted at him that he was only in office “because three people failed to vote.” Russell, himself, seemed to be unfazed by all the hullabaloo, responding only to say, “I won't resign.”

This has to be an embarrassing moment for Central Lake and it may be time for the residents of that pleasant little village to settle down and put an end to the circus-like atmosphere that has taken over the council meetings.

This is only my opinion and you can take it for whatever worth you wish, but at this point it seems to me that matters are only being made worse at these meetings by the audience. The insults, the calls for resignation and threats of recall are no longer constructive and serve only as disruptive factors that prolong the meeting. And I believe those constant calls for his resignation only serve to fortify Mr. Russell's resolve to stay in office. The insults and the catcalls don't bother him but the attention he is receiving is priceless. Stop demanding that he resign. He's not going to.

Voters in the village have two options open to them. They can learn to live with Mr. Russell's unique style of management or they can try to oust him from office. It appears obvious that many people do not want to follow the first choice, though he does have his supporters. If, on the other hand, trying to oust him is the way folks want to go, they should do it. Maybe that would bring about a resignation but it's not likely. For weeks, I have heard that there are those in the community who are going to recall him from office, but as of late Tuesday afternoon, not a single soul had taken the first step toward launching a recall of the Central Lake Village President, which would be to submit the proposed language for a recall petition to the county clerk. I'm told lawyers have been consulted but anyone serious about a recall effort can find out all they need to know by contacting the Antrim County Clerk.

I am no fan of recall efforts and have in the past used this space to speak out against them. But if ever a public official deserved to be recalled from office, it is Walter Russell. I cannot imagine why a man would want to put up with the verbal abuse, the threats, the brickbats and the ridicule that is coming his way these days, but he seems determined to keep his seat at the table. Short of his unlikely resignation, it would seem as though a recall initiative is the only way Central Lake will return to normal. Shouting and yelling, threats and insults, only make the situation worse.