

Becker School Board. 1980-84.

I served three years as Chairman of the Becker School Board at a very challenging time. It was never my desire to be on the school board. I had plenty of things to do, and running for a political office was not on my list.

In the early 1970s the School Board, hereafter the Board, had hired a disciplinarian as the High School Principal.

The High School apparently needed him, and he was effective.

Let's call the High School Principal, John.

John was an absolutely classic choice for discipline.

He was a pugnacious, retired marine, with a quick and lasting temper.

John was the angriest man I have ever known, before or since.

Several years later in 1978 the Board hired a new Superintendent of Becker Schools.

Let's call the new Superintendent, Richard.

Richard was weak, devious, syrupy, and incompetent, especially in financial affairs.

The Superintendent and the High School Principal did not get along.

To make matters worse, the Board "ambush-fired" John while on a team building event.

To make matters even worse, John was suing Richard and the Board for wrongful termination.

To make matters even far worse, John, the former principal, was elected to a three-year term on the Board in 1980.

John had a substantial following among the electorate and especially with the older teachers.

My first wife was in a group of mothers with school-age kids that were very keen on school issues.

This bunch got together for family picnics or dinners frequently to talk about these topics.

It was well known that Richard was a poor Superintendent and that the School District was headed for financial trouble despite the recent passage of an "Excess Levy Referendum".

One Friday evening someone came up with the idea of a petition to get the State Auditor involved.

The requirements for petitioning a formal audit are proscribed by state law,

There had to be a lead petitioner.

The group decided that I would have the greatest name recognition at the top of the petition.

I accepted on the condition that other members of the group would collect the signatures, not me.

I visited the State Auditor, Arne Carlson, in his St. Paul office twice.

Once to get instructions and the second to deliver the filled petition.

When I mentioned Becker school finances I got immediate appointments.

We had already made the Metro TV News several times.

Arne was one of last proteges of Hubert Humphrey, as was Walter Mondale.

The audit results were delivered by Carlson himself in April of 1981.

The crowd overfilled the big auditorium.

The Twin City TV stations were there.

Arne Carlson used this and other public recognition to get elected to two terms, eight years, as Minnesota Governor.

The audit found many discrepancies, some minor, and some huge. But the killer finding was that the school district budget projected a deficit of \$300,000.

By Minnesota law school districts cannot run a deficit.



**Tom as in
campaign flyer.**

The Becker School Board and the Superintendent were proven grossly incompetent.

The Board consisted of six members, elected to staggered, three-year terms.

Two seats came open each year in May.

The same group that promoted me for the audit petition, wanted me to file for a Board seat.

They did all the campaigning, all I did was give a couple speeches and write an article or two.

Far more people voted than in any previous election.

I won by an overwhelming number over five other candidates.

Campaign Committee did a fantastic job.

Now I was on the Board with strong public support, but I needed more than that.

I needed the power to make a lot of big changes, fast.

I needed the control that only the Chairman of the Board had.

After the May 1981 election the Board consisted of:

1. Me, Tom Barthel.
2. John, aggrieved and filled with hate. Clumsily fired by the Board in 1979, elected in 1980.
3. Glen, John's protégé, that had been elected in 1980.
4. Don, long-time board member, farmer, honest.
5. Waldon, long-time board member, farmer, thief, liar, is only in it for donuts, free meals, and his kids.
6. Malcolm, long-time board member, farmer, honest, my good friend, conflict averse, educated.
Malcolm was a soft spoken and gentle man.

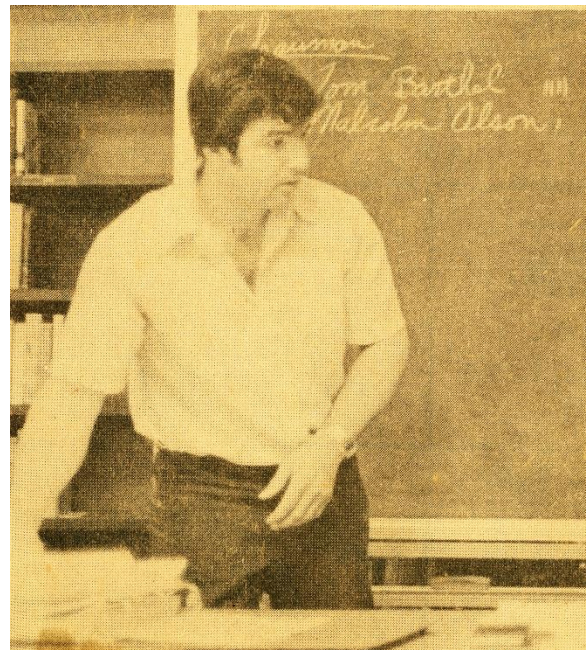
The Board Offices of Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary, and Vice Chairman were selected as the first item of business, at the first meeting of the year.

Malcolm had been the Chairman for the last several years.

Malcolm was uncharacteristically late for that meeting, he did not show up until all of the offices were filled.

I never spoke with him about the subject, I suspect he knew exactly what he was doing.

Malcolm was also a prominent member in the same Baptist Congregation that the failed Superintendent was a respected member of.



Tom, newly elected Chairman.

It took at least three YEA votes to elect an officer.

I voted as needed to deny every nominee the required three YEAs.

I was nominated last and got the necessary three votes.

Then as the Chairman, I quickly nominated Malcolm for Vice Chairman, John as Treasurer, Glen as Secretary, in succession as a demonstration of how things were going to go for the next three years.

The Board handled routine business, authorized negotiations for the buyout of the final year of the failed Superintendent's contract, authorized the hiring of an interim Superintendent, authorized a search for a new Superintendent, and adjourned around 11pm.

I wanted an interim Superintendent to do the dirty work of cutting programs, firing teachers, and raising prices so the new Superintendent could start with a clean slate.

The next big thing the Board had to do was come to an agreement with the failed superintendent. Of course, we did that at a public meeting.

There was seating space for about ten spectators in the Boardroom, so we held a lot of meetings in the High School Library during the year.

When both St. Paul attorneys pulled up in the same white Cadillac the electorate on both sides of the issue had questions.

Peter Popovich was the Board's attorney.

Peter had been a prominent member of the Minnesota legislature.

In fact, he fashioned Minnesota's Open Meeting Law, which became a model for the entire US.

In 1983 he was named the first Chief Justice of the Minnesota Appellate Court.

In 1985 he was named the Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court.

I got to know Peter a little bit, through work and visits to his home on the St. Croix River.

We settled with Richard, the failed Superintendent, at the going rate of one year's salary.



Tom the Chairman, Richard the Superintendent, Glen the Secretary.

The teacher's three-year contract negotiations were stalled and past due.

Waldon had been designated the Board's chief negotiator several months before I was elected.

Waldon was never my choice as a negotiator.

He looked at negotiations as something to win not something to accomplish.

In my opinion the remaining contract issues were insignificant, and the pay difference was minor.

We had a lot of bigger problems to solve

The next step was state mandated mediation in St. Paul. On a late August Thursday evening, all six

Board members rode to St. Paul in the district's van.

Mediation is always slow and tedious.

Around midnight the mediator asked me to join him in the hallway.

He proposed we meet in the middle as mediators often do.

That seemed fair to me.



BECKER BOARD MEMBER Waldon Anderson (at right) snoozed during the board meeting Thursday. He probably had good reason to be tired. He was up until 5 a.m. that day negotiating what appears to be a suc-

cessful settlement with Becker teachers for a new two-year salary and fringe benefit package. Other board member is Donald Johnson.

I told the Board that was the settlement, and they accepted it, all except Waldon. I did not have the authority, but I did have the power.

The long-serving superintendent of the St. Michael-Albertville School District, William Tidmarsh, had recently retired. I called him, we met at The Coffee Cup. School finance was his specialty; I liked him right away.

He was direct speaking, quick with math, and a hard edge for evaluating situations and teachers.

By mid-September Tidmarsh and I had prepared a preliminary list for teacher cuts. There was no way to make significant reductions in operating costs without cutting teachers.

We hired Tidmarsh that week.

Tidmarsh had financial suggestions within days, many of which the Board adopted immediately. Interim Superintendent Tidmarsh did a magnificent job of refocusing and remodeling the Becker School system.

He was the architect of the financial plan that cut waste and increased revenue such that the Board could give taxpayers some relief by reducing the Excess Levy for 1983-84 by over \$100,000.

The teacher's union requires that employers lay off based solely on seniority.

Employers should have additional factors in mind, such as teaching skills, subject knowledge, the ability to keep order in the classroom and others.

For instance, we avoided eliminating the job of teacher with a child who was at risk of dying with a lapse of medical insurance.

As I recall, we cut about twenty teacher jobs that evening.

The Board had agreed to the general list.

I cautioned the Board about the need for personnel privacy.

Tidmarsh prepared the library for an overflow crowd.

Around a hundred people plus staff showed for the meeting, many standing.

Some somber, some angry, some just curious.

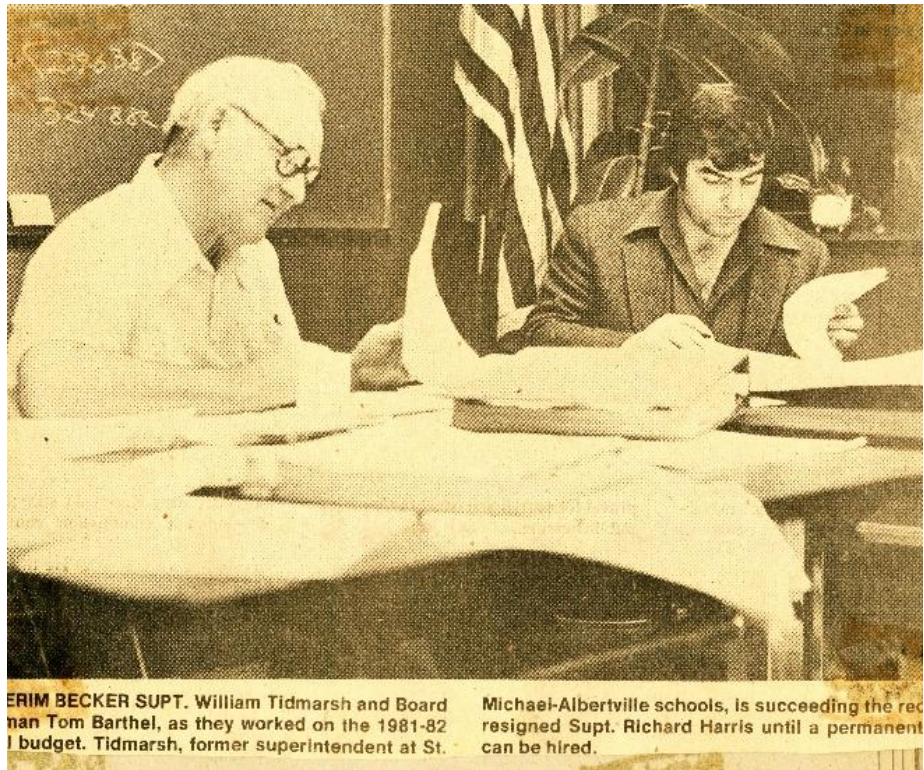
The air was tense but what to name that tension. Maybe somber expectation would fit.

The Board supported me on this, they knew this had to be done.

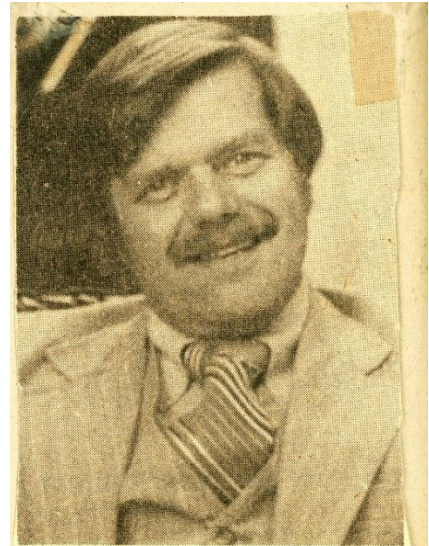
We had to cut every position individually.

That probably took less than an hour.

It seemed to take a long time



The Superintendency in Becker was hard to fill. Mostly because of years of dissention in the community and also on the Board. We made strong offers to several initially interested candidates, but after consideration their families turned us down. We had overused Dr. Tidmarsh. When we met in August, he was looking for part-time, advisory work. Instead, I immersed him in a high-volume, high-stress job, for six event-filled months. I always met with the Superintendent for an hour or so before a Board meeting. Tidmarsh had been telling me that he was worn-out for several months, but I again and again prevailed upon the good old man to guide us a little longer. This time was different, he was experiencing symptoms that could presage serious health problems. After some discussion, I recessed the Board meeting, stepped into the Superintendent's office, closed the door, and then called Dr. Jim Mantzke at his home in Bangor, Wisconsin. Jim was on the bottom of our list, literally, because he was from out-of-state. He was a high performer, having been named Wisconsin's Superintendent of the Year, at a young age. He could fill our need for an Interim Superintendent job and start tomorrow.



JIM MANTZKE took over as the superintendent of Becker Schools last week on an interim basis. From Bangor, Wis., Mantzke succeeds William Tidmarsh, another interim superintendent, who worked for the district since August. The Becker board has chosen Neil Dietrich to become permanent superinten-

One especially enjoyable task I had as Chairman of the School Board was to award the graduating seniors their diplomas. In 1984 that included my daughter, Shannon. Shannon spent 1983 in Uruguay as foreign exchange student. She took her clarinet and played in the marching band of Melo, Uruguay.



In May of 1983, as John and Glen's three-year terms were ending, they both decided not to run. I immediately encouraged my good friend Clair to run. He had the knowledge and the proven skills to lead now mellow School Board. Clair won John's seat, and in 1984 after I retired from the Board, Clair was elected Chairman. He went on to lead the Board well for many years.

My greatest regret was the way I had to handle Community Education (CE) and the Joint Powers Agreement (JPA).

CE in Becker was a joint effort by the City Council and the School Board.

That seems like a good idea and no doubt it was initially.

But as near as we could determine there was a half-time job staffed by a highly paid Director.

Because the Director's office was in a City building, it was impossible to supervise.



JOINT SESSION. Members of the Becker School Board (left side) and the Becker City Council met last week in the BHS media center to review the community services joint powers agreement. From left to right: Councilman Rick Haskell, Councilman John Haskell, Glen Seeley. At head of table, Supt. Jim Mantzke and Board Chairman Tom Barthel. Mayor Hap Stumvoll (hidden) Councilmen Dennis Veint, Mike Doering, and Stan Herkenhoff. Councilman Rick

Later, at the School Board meeting pictured on the right, Dave Graning presented the Board with a petition that carried 286 names.

I received the petition without comment and went to the next item on our agenda, even though most of the signers were my supporters.

There was no doubt that the petition was a manifestation of just how powerful CE Director and his allies could be.

They could challenge the Board or the Superintendent on any future issue.

That was not the organization I wanted to leave.

Furthermore, I needed to leave the Board and the new Superintendent blameless and take the whole blame with me.

It worked perfectly.

I did not run for reelection.

I never intended to.



BECKER RESIDENT Dave Graning (right) handed over a petition with 286 signatures, requesting the Becker School Board reinstate the original community services joint powers agreement Thursday at the Becker School Board meeting. Accepting the papers was Chairman Tom Barthel. Also pictured are Board Members Glen Seeley, front, and Malcolm Olson, back.

In my mother's home library were a set of Classic books that she bought when the local public school closed down.

I read them all before I was ten.

My lifelong heroes have been my parents and men I met through those books.

Cincinnatus was an early Roman farmer.

Around 500 BC, he was summoned by his neighbors to lead them in a fight against an attacking tribe.

He defeated Rome's enemy, relinquished control of the army, and returned to his farm.

Our lives, however petty, should have heroes.

The photo on right was taken in May 1984, upon the occasion of Gail's election to the School Board, and my retirement from the same.

Gail served on the Board for nine years and as the Becker Public Librarian for twenty-eight years.

Gail and I got together in 1992 and married in 2000.

The love of my life.

I take pride in bringing peace and order to the School Board and the Becker Community; and having brought professional management to the school organization, and recruited Chairman Grandy and other good members.

I am especially proud for having led the Board that recruited my good friend Dr. Jim Mantzke as the Becker Superintendent.

Dr. Mantzke retired more than twenty years later as the longest serving Superintendent in Minnesota.

I always wore a jacket and most likely a tie at all School Board events, except my first meeting and my last meeting.

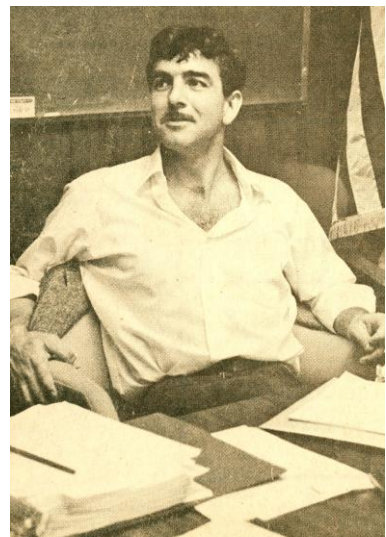
The photo to right is from my last meeting.

I could not have been more relaxed.

Tom Barthel.



SMILING FACES. Newly-elected Becker Boardmember Gail Mickelson (at left) and successful incumbent Malcolm Olson accepted congratulations from Chairman Tom Barthel at Tuesday's Becker Board of Education meeting. Also pictured is Pat Peterson, member of the Becker Board.



BARTHEL completed his 3-year term as a member of the Board of Education last week, serving all 3 years as chairman. And, he will be retiring for his fellow members. See story on this page.