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COMMENTARY

Bruce Andriatch: A dirty job, but it has to be kept clean

By Bruce Andriatch
News Columnist

When the Erie County Association of Town Superintendents of Highways gets together for its regular meeting, talk generally turns to typical highway superintendent stuff. Topics such as budgets and potholes and front-end loaders and dirt.

Oh, how they would like to return to those days rather than spending their time wondering who in the room was going to be the next one to get his picture in the paper for all the wrong reasons.

In the last year, two highway superintendents have been the subject of criminal investigations.

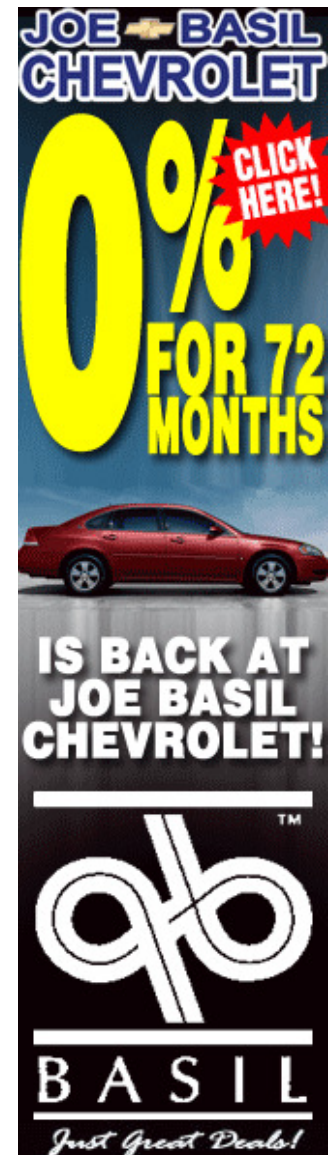
FBI agents went to the home of Richard Reese of Lancaster last month to question him about allegations that he used town labor, equipment and materials for his personal benefit. Reese was taken into custody after he allegedly made threatening and suicidal statements to agents. He is on a paid leave of absence while the investigation continues.

Reese's arrest came on the heels of the conviction last year of David Pierce of Marilla, who was charged with stealing from the town and using town workers to build a huge fishing and swimming pond on his family property. The day after he was sentenced to spend seven months in federal prison, he committed suicide.

Pierce killed himself when the very small fraternity of superintendents was still reeling from the 2003 suicide of John Hedges of the Town of Tonawanda, who was the subject of a pair of lawsuits filed by subordinates.

"It's a scary thing, and it really puzzles us," said former Amherst Highway Superintendent Patrick Lucey. "I don't know just what the reasons are."

Lucey served Amherst for 22 years. He has been out of office for more than 10 years but remains active as




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secretary of the county association. He noted that the job has historically been held by people with a background in farming, people who thought nothing of using some of their own farming equipment to do work for the municipality. They acted for the good of the town, he said.

“Well, there’s another end of that stick, and I know for a fact that this is part of the problem,” he said.

Pierce was convicted of using town equipment for personal use. That is the allegation facing Reese. In several other cases, highway superintendents crossed a line between public responsibility and private benefit.

“Some people feel that more than what they’re getting is their due,” Lucey said. “It doesn’t matter what profession they’re in; they’re going to do things that we consider to be illegal or immoral, and they’re going to have to pay the piper.”

The incidents of criminal behavior among highway superintendents come at a time when officials are questioning whether it should be an elected or appointed position. Gov. David A. Paterson floated the idea of making this job, along with town clerk and tax receiver, appointed positions. Doing so would make consolidation of services among municipalities more likely, he has said.

Lucey is arguing against the idea on behalf of the local association; it would put highway superintendents at the mercy of town boards and make them less responsive to the needs of the voters. When residents have been given the choice at the polls in recent years, they have chosen to keep the position elected.

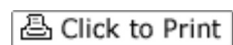
It will be interesting to see if the problems of a few elected highway superintendents have any impact on future public votes on the question.

Voters want to their elected leaders to be clean. Even the ones who like dirt.

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