

# GEAUGA COUNTY Maple Leaf

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## Chardon Fire Dedicates 1st Baby Box in County



Safe Haven Baby Box official Jessi Getrost explains how the box, which was recently installed at the Chardon Fire Station, works.

ALLISON WILSON/KMG

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Chardon Fire Department celebrated the addition of Geauga County's first and only Safe Haven Baby Box Dec. 3, inviting area priests to bless the box as part of its unveiling and dedication at the station.

"The Safe Haven Baby Box stands as a promise that no child will be abandoned without hope and no mother will be left without a safe option," Chardon Fire Chief Justin Geiss told the crowd gathered in the station's vehicle bay. "It's a symbol of compassion and action and a reminder that every life is precious. May this box never be needed, but if it is, may it serve as a doorway to safety, mercy and a future filled with possibilities."

Pro-life charity God's Tiny Miracles co-founder Amy Kalal described

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## Thompson, Montville Seek OPWC Grant to Chip, Seal Burrows

By BRANDON LICHTINGER  
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Thompson Township Trustees approved paperwork Dec. 3 to apply for grant funding from the Ohio Public Works Commission to chip and seal Burrows Road.

Thompson shares the gravel road with Montville Township and both plan to split the project cost, with each contributing \$150,000. The OPWC would match the combined amount to complete the work.

"Every year, the OPWC gives out money for public works, but usually you have to match it, it's not just free money," said Thompson Township Trustee Justin Falcone in a follow-up interview Dec. 5.

The Geauga County Engineer's Office has been advising both townships on how to improve the road

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## Montville Trustee Randy Petersen Retires After 24 Years of Service

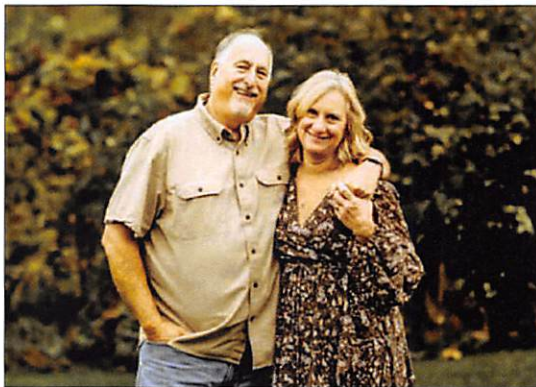
By BRANDON LICHTINGER  
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As Randy Petersen hangs up his trustee hat at the end of this year, he will leave behind a legacy of dedication and service to the community he loves.

"I would say it's bittersweet," the Montville Township trustee said in a phone interview on Dec. 4. "I've loved serving this township for 24 years."

Petersen moved his family — which included his wife, Diane, and their five children — from Lake County to Montville in 1994. In 1998, his then-14-year-old son, Dave, encouraged him to get involved in the community if the family planned to stay in Montville.

"He was becoming a fire cadet in the Montville Fire Department (at the time) and he wanted me to get involved with the fire department," Petersen recalled. "I don't like the sight of blood. I'm not in any way a fireman, and I said, 'I can't do that.' So, he said, 'Why don't you get involved in our local government?' So, we started going



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Randy Petersen looks back on his twenty-four years as a Montville trustee, while looking forward to retirement and spending more time with his family and wife, Diane.

to trustee meetings, just listening in. I did that for two years. I'd go to every trustee meeting and just listen."

After Petersen expressed interest in running for trustee, longtime Montville Township Trustee Alexa Holbert advised him to join the Montville Township Board of Zoning Appeals.

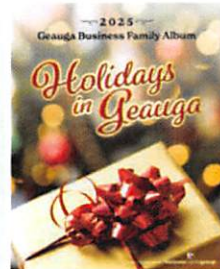
The experience gave him a

deeper understanding of township issues and ultimately led to his first campaign for trustee.

"I did something that I guess nobody did back then. I went door to door to the people of Montville, introduced myself to people because I wasn't born in Montville, I had only been here six years or

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the effort that went into securing a box in Geauga County.

"(Co-founder Clare O'Brien) and I took off one day in July a year and a half ago, visited almost every fire station in the county and said, 'We want to work with you to get a baby box in here,'" Kalal recalled. "And we got warm receptions. Walked in here, Justin goes, 'I want it here.'"

While the Munson and Burton fire departments had also expressed interest, both stations told her the box belonged in Chardon, Kalal said.

She thanked the Chardon Fire Department for its willingness to take on the project, as well as the people involved with God's Tiny Miracles, donors, the Geauga County Catholic Pro-Life Coalition and the construction workers who assisted.

Infinity Construction, of Warrensville Heights, absorbed the installation costs, including building permits and labor, Kalal said.

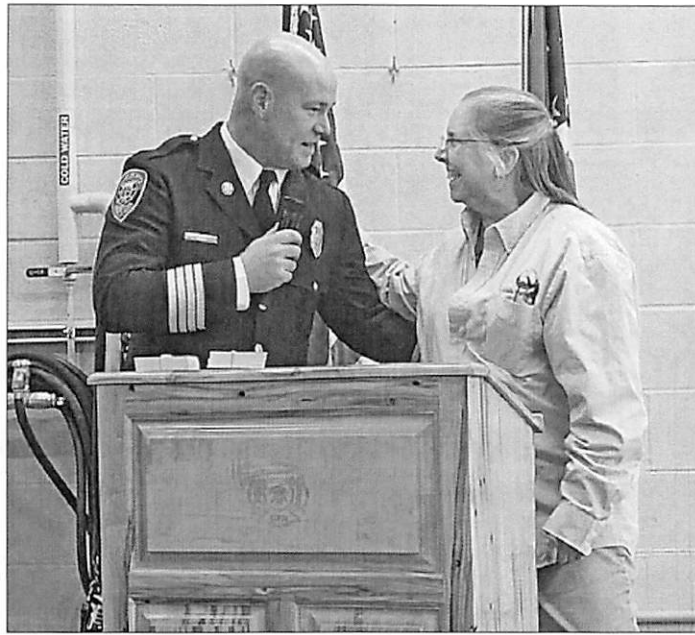
God's Tiny Miracles also presented the fire department with a \$5,100 check to cover five years of upkeep.

This box marks the 399th in the country and 22nd in Ohio, said Jessi Getrost, of Safe Haven Baby Box, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

The company's founder, Monica Kelsey, was herself abandoned at a hospital as an infant, Getrost said.

Kelsey was inspired to launch the boxes after a trip to South Africa, where she saw one on the side of a church, Getrost said.

"So, she started in her home state of Indiana and now it has just grown and we have 150 boxes in Indiana alone," she said. "We



Chardon Fire Chief Justin Geiss and God's Tiny Miracles co-founder Amy Kalal express gratitude to all those who made the baby box's installation possible during its dedication and blessing Dec. 3.

have saved 70 babies through our boxes and over 177 parents have called our hotlines and we've helped them walk into hospitals or fire departments to safely surrender face-to-face."

The organization hopes eventually to place a box in every state, she said.

The box is temperature controlled at 75 degrees and will circulate air to heat or cool the inside as needed, Getrost said.

It has two doors — one on the outside of the station and one on the inside. When the outside door is opened and a baby is placed inside, there is a 60-second delay before dispatch is automatically notified, allowing the parent time to walk away, she said.

The outside door locks automatically when closed, so no one can remove the infant, Getrost said.

A light on the box will also turn amber when an infant has been placed inside, she said.

The deaths of twin infants in May 2023 partially inspired the idea to bring a box to Geauga County, said CPLC Chair Mike Hollowell, recalling the case from Cleveland in which the mother, a 16-year old girl, abandoned the twins in a trash can after giving birth.

"Once we heard that, I said, 'We gotta do something to give that woman an option other than being in despair,'" Hollowell said. "This baby box is a result of that. That's where everything started."

Hollowell dedicated the box to the twins. "Out of evil comes good and this is a situation where this box would not exist if it was not for them," he said.

Rev. Jay McPhillips of St. Helen Catholic Church led a prayer prior to the box's blessing.

"We just pray for all the women who feel desperate, we pray for all those who feel lost, we pray that this will give them a sense of hope and an opportunity to give life to their children, to allow their children to continue to live so that they can go on with their lives after they give birth," he said.

Rev. Scott Goodfellow of St. Mary Catholic Church then performed the blessing.

"We pray for all infants who will be saved through (the box), their mothers, their families, the struggles that they go through," he said. "May this baby box be a sign of great love and great hope in our community. May you continue to bless us as we spread the word about it, that many mothers and children may be helped through this and that (they) may know the life that our Lord has given to them."

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and guiding trustees through the grant application process, Falcone said.

Montville Township Trustees also approved submitting paperwork for the grant funding during their Dec. 2 meeting.

"This road project was estimated over a year ago right around the \$600,000 mark," said Montville Township Trustee Jim Marsic Dec. 5. "We're hoping to get half of that cut

off with OPWC funding. The two townships would split the remaining balance equally, 50/50, after the match from the OPWC funding."

The engineer's office, however, also warned trustees the project estimate might be higher this year, Marsic added.

"Everything is escalating, the cost of doing any kind of roadwork nowadays," he said. "You can't plan anything longer than a couple months ahead because the prices keep escalating."

Thompson residents voted down a 2-mile roads and bridges levy Nov. 4, with 240 votes for and 294 against, according to the final official results of the Geauga County Board of Elections.

Falcone said caring for and funding township roads poses unique challenges.

"The issue with road levies out here is, you have township roads, you have county roads and then you have state routes. Obviously, the township is just responsible for township roads," Falcone said Dec. 5. "The (levy) we tried to pass was 2 mills, which would have generated around \$160,000 a year for the four-year term, if it would have passed. (But) people on county roads and state routes don't want to vote for the levy because obviously their taxes are going to go up and it's not the township maintaining their roads. You kind of have to try to get everybody in the spirit of, 'This is improving your community,' but obviously, no one ever just wants to pay more taxes, especially if it's not going to affect them, per se."

Without the levy, trustees have been trying to meet residents' needs as responsibly as possible.

"I know we have maintenance issues on all the roads, but this is a good value for

Thompson residents," said Trustee Erwin "Kok" Leffel at the Dec. 3 meeting.

Between Thompson's budget constraints and the fact the township would only be responsible for one-fourth of the project cost, the joint road project with Montville took priority over others.

"The price is perfect," Leffel said.

Residents at the meeting expressed frustration about the condition of Thompson's dirt and gravel roads, citing chuckholes, loose gravel that has damaged vehicles and other nuisances on multiple routes.

"It's a never-ending battle with these dirt roads," Falcone said Dec. 5. "The problem out here with these gravel and dirt roads is, you put stone down in spring, try to cover potholes and if the berms aren't cut properly and you get some good rains, the gravel will wash to the side, cars will kick it up (and) when the plows come through, the plows will kick it off into the ditch."

Chipping and sealing — sealing small rocks on road surfaces with tar — provides a more affordable alternative to asphalt paving, which can cost more than \$1 million per mile, Falcone said.

"With chip and seal, you have to come back and put another layer on, whether it's two or three years based on the wear and tear," he added. "The more layers you put on a chip-and-seal road, the more durable it gets, so it's not as costly if you wanted to switch over and pave it because the roads are already solid. It's in a good state to be paved."

Falcone, who has prioritized road improvements during his two years as trustee, said he understands residents' frustrations but wishes more voters would get involved in local government and learn about township processes like road funding.

"I spearheaded doing something (with roads) the day I got elected and it's just taken this long," Falcone said. "It's hard to get something done. Then, you have people who live out in the country who say, 'Well, I live out here, I like the dirt roads, I want the dirt roads, I don't want paved roads,' (and) then, you'll have cars flying up and down here. So, you always have both sides of the argument of dirt roads versus paved roads. You have to balance what the people want because they're the ones who elect you. But, I do believe that improving roads even if it's not paving them is something we need to work toward, even if it's just one road at a time, very slowly."

Falcone hopes to see improvements made to various parts of the township over time, including the fire department, he said.

"We can't just let these things slide, let budgets dissipate and equipment get old and not be replaced because that's important stuff that our township needs," he said. "With all the people complaining about dirt roads, that's the voice of the residents and we need to listen to the voice of the residents. But, I would love for more people to come to meetings and ask questions, bring their questions or concerns about the roads to the meetings or anything else about the township, instead of keeping them to themselves or airing them on social media."

In the meantime, trustees will continue looking for feasible ways to maintain the township roads, including pursuing grant monies where possible, Falcone said.

Once both boards officially submit the paperwork for the grant application to the county, the engineer's office will put the project out for bid, Falcone said, adding he hopes to see the chip-and-seal project completed by the end of next summer.



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