

## **Building a Better Coolville: Mayor Neil Cowen's Vision for Progress and Community**

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Neil Cowen's journey to becoming the Mayor of Coolville is as unexpected as it is inspiring. Originally from Newark, Ohio, Mayor Cowen relocated to Coolville in the spring of 2014, with no intentions of stepping into a leadership role. However, driven by his deep-rooted belief in integrity and community, he was compelled to run for mayor, a position he secured in the November 2023 election. Since taking office in January 2024, Mayor Cowen has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to advancing the village and enhancing the quality of life for the residents.

Coolville is a village defined by its laid-back atmosphere, where life moves at a slower pace, and honesty and straightforwardness are highly valued. It's a close-knit community with a strong sense of pride in its local amenities, such as the excellent library system and various small businesses, from mechanics to mom-and-pop shops. The village's emphasis on keeping things local is a testament to the residents' commitment to maintaining a strong, self-sustaining community.

One of the major challenges Mayor Cowen faced upon arriving in Coolville was the village's aging infrastructure. The community had been divided over a controversial sewer system installation in 2014, but since then, the village has made significant progress, reducing the related loan by a million dollars. However, Mayor Cowen knows there's more work to be done. In spring 2025, the village will begin replacing decades-old water lines and meters to improve efficiency and cut costs.

Coolville's infrastructure continues to advance, with a \$2.1 million ODOT project planned for the Brimstone Road intersection, along with new sidewalks and road paving. In his first six months in office, Mayor Cowen has successfully secured over half a million dollars in grants and additional county funding for these projects. He's also working with Hocking-Athens-Perry Community Action (HAPCAP) to establish low-cost public transportation, ensuring residents can access essential services in nearby towns.

Mayor Cowen's leadership style is deeply influenced by his 40-year career as a high school wrestling coach. He approaches his role as mayor much like he would coach a team, constantly seeking ways to improve and progress. This mindset drives his daily efforts to enhance the village, and he places a high value on communication and collaboration. He has been proactive in reaching out to neighboring communities and fellow mayors, exchanging ideas and finding

solutions to common challenges. He values the insights of his peers and is committed to working together to achieve shared goals, believing that "the biggest flattery around is duplicating what other people are having success with."

Mayor Cowen's involvement in the Mayors' Partnership for Progress (MPP) has been instrumental in his efforts to connect with other leaders and access valuable resources. Encouraged by his village clerk, he joined the MPP shortly after taking office. Through this partnership, he has built connections with other mayors and city managers, which have proven invaluable in his work. He has also been involved in collaborating with others to try to secure grant funding for larger regional projects. The MPP has provided him with a wealth of information and opportunities to learn from others, which he greatly appreciates.

Looking ahead, Mayor Cowen envisions a Coolville where the current infrastructure issues are resolved within the next several years. He is particularly focused on improvements such as sidewalks, water lines, and more. Beyond infrastructure, he aims to modernize Main Street, support the growth of small businesses, and eventually establish parks to enhance the village's appeal as a desirable place to live. As Coolville gears up for several exciting events in the coming months, Mayor Cowen is enthusiastic about the opportunities these events bring to strengthen community ties and celebrate the village's unique character.

Reflecting on his tenure, Mayor Cowen offers advice to other mayors and aspiring leaders: "Be yourself. Stay true to yourself, don't listen to the noise, and if you have a good idea and good people working with you, things will work out." He emphasizes the importance of staying on course and continually evaluating whether the community is improving each day. A particularly meaningful moment for him was receiving a call from the County Commissioner confirming a \$100,000 contribution toward Coolville's water project. This investment reaffirmed the community's commitment to progress and encouraged him to continue pursuing improvements, despite any criticism or doubts.

As Mayor Cowen continues to lead Coolville, his dedication to the village and its residents is evident in the progress they have already made. With a focus on collaboration, communication, and continuous improvement, he is making a lasting impact on the community he proudly serves.