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**HIGHWAY SUPERINTENDENT**

**JOE WASILEWSKI**

**AND THE TOWN OF LORRAINE**







# Highway Superintendent Joe Wasilewski and the Town of Lorraine

By Lori Lovely  
PROFILE CORRESPONDENT

Although he came from the private sector, where he owned a residential construction business, Joe Wasilewski, highway superintendent of the town of Lorraine since 2018, understands that elected officials in the public sector work for the taxpayers.

"When you lose sight that you're a servant to the people, you've lost sight of your duty," he said.

Keenly aware of his duty, Joe works hard to serve his community and give residents what they need. In fact, he ran for office because he believed it offered an opportunity to provide the taxpayers more.

"I spent time on the town board," he said. "I found that we were taxing people, but not putting that money to use in the highway budget. There was no equipment schedule, no maintenance schedule, no road

replacement schedule. They didn't do full, in-depth road repairs. The town wasn't spending the money."

When he took office, he discovered just how much money the town had in reserve funds that weren't being spent. Instead of using it to buy equipment as needed, the town always bonded money for purchases. Joe recognized the potential savings of establishing an equipment replacement schedule and buying pieces outright.

## Budgeting Basics

"This is a business," the hometown superintendent said.

Finding more economical ways to conduct business started with creating an equipment replacement plan.

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The town of Lorraine highway department crew (L-R) are John Riordan, Devin Filson, Mike Dobbins, Seth Widrick and Harold Downey.

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"I developed a 20-year replacement schedule. I have a very good working relationship with my board, and we have developed a plan to have needed equipment to provide for the taxpayers."

Given the current lead times on equipment, he said he needs to plan for their next plow truck now.

In the meantime, he sprays equipment with Krown Rust Protection and requires daily equipment checks recorded on log sheets. These "truck sheets" record information such as fuel, length of time on a job, whether the job is for the town or county, types of materials hauled and the load count, what's broken, what's been fixed and other relevant details — all on one piece of paper.

Separate spreadsheets list the maintenance schedule and replacement plan for each piece of equipment. This streamlines recordkeeping. "You have to do the paperwork and set up a system to make strides," he said.

Lorraine's highway superintendent may say he has no projects on the planning table, but he and full-time staff Harold Downey, foreman; Mike Dobbins, MEO 1; John Riordan, MEO 2; Devin Filson, MEO 1; and Seth Widrick, MEO 1 have a lot of work to do.

Also included on the to-do list is road maintenance. Just as he developed a 20-year replacement plan for equipment, Joe crafted a 10-year plan for roads. To assist in accomplishing this, he has gone after excess revenue.

He's also using all \$125,000 of his CHIPS funding, but because CHIPS is designed as a match program, that means that an equal amount of taxpayer dollars also is used. The funds used to complete these projects come from a 2023 highway budget of \$1,055,368. Even a substantial budget like this isn't enough to keep up with maintaining a diverse road infrastructure from gravel to blacktop, amidst increasing costs.

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To boost revenue, the Lorraine highway department fulfills a snow and ice contract with the county. They also mow, grade, fix potholes and pick up trash. “We get paid for everything we do for the county,” Joe said.

Guaranteed work is listed as revenue on his spreadsheets. Everything else is surplus revenue. “We use the excess revenue for equipment. This has helped update our fleet.”

### Projects, Duties

The crew is currently working on cold in-place recycling 2.02 mi. of blacktop road and constructing half a mile of road to be paved. There are 17 gravel roads and six paved roads to be maintained in the town. In

addition, the town maintains county roads in their town. That translates to 67.29 lane mi. of town road and 62.30 of county road.

Come wintertime, those miles are divided into three plow routes, each of which takes three hours to complete. “I hired a sixth guy to be able to plow the roads twice in a 12-hour shift,” Joe said.

There’s usually plenty of snow to plow. The area gets an average of 250 in. of the white stuff a year, although the superintendent observes that the past couple years have been rather mild. As a playful young superintendent, Joe had to rub that fact into his fellow superintendents’ faces by calling last winter to ask how their weather was, knowing that they received 4-5 ft. of snow while Lorraine got only 6 in.

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Helping to maintain the roads in the town of Lorraine is this 2021 Caterpillar 120M grader.





Part of the town of Lorraine highway department's fleet includes a 2022 International HX 520, a 2019 Caterpillar 938M loader, a 2019 International HX 520, a 2007 PayStar and a 2016 WorkStar.

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That said, he remembers a few winter days in 2018 when his area received 3-4 ft. at a time. When his wife, Stephanie Kellar, moved from Henderson, which lies west of Lorraine and doesn't get as much snow, he joked that she had second thoughts upon finding snow as high as the mailbox during her first winter. "She still dreads winter," Joe said, "mostly because I get up at night to check the roads."

Having a reliable night crew makes this less frequent. The highway department is prepared for whatever amount falls, with 200 tons of undercover salt storage and plenty of sand on hand. "We run a 4:1 mix and use liquid de-icing agents," he said.

#### Snow Country

Located in Jefferson County, Lorraine is named after the region in France due to heavy French settlement. *continued on page 34*



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tlement, which began around 1802. The town formed in 1804, breaking away from the town of Mexico in Oswego County. Originally named Malta, the name was changed to Lorraine in 1808 to reflect its French heritage and to avoid confusion with another town named Malta in Saratoga County. Part of Lorraine was later used to form the town of Worth in 1848.

One of the area's biggest attractions is Winona Forest, located on the boundary of southern Jefferson County and northern Oswego County in northern New York. The 9,233-acre state forest offers snowmobiling, mushing, hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, dog sledding, birdwatching, horseback riding, hunting and fishing.

Winona Forest is one of the snowiest locations east of the Rocky Mountains, averaging 250 in. of snowfall per year, due in part to prevailing westerly winds that move cold air over the warm water of Lake Ontario to produce lake-effect snow.

### Life in Lorraine, Beyond

This is where Joe grew up — and where he still lives, 41 years later, with his wife and three kids: Aidan, Autumn and Trevor. In November

2022, they moved into a new timber-framed home he built — a vestige of his days as a home builder.

The house sits on almost 50 acres, which are home to pigs, chickens and the German Wirehair dogs Joe trains for bird hunting, with hopes of adding cattle and sheep soon. For approximately 18 years, he has guided hunts across much of the United States and Canada but has yet to be permanently tempted away from his hometown.

His roots in Lorraine run deep. His great-grandfather served as highway superintendent in the 1980s and his grandfather worked in the department in the 1990s.

In a very small town, communication is often done via face-to-face chats, although the highway department manages a website to convey pertinent information to constituents. The boss communicates with employees over a county-wide radio system and all employees have portable radios.

"My phone's always on and my door's always open," Joe said.

But people would have to travel some distance to reach that door. There are few neighbors along the mile-and-a-half road leading to his place, which is just the way he likes it.

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He recently helped Lorraine write a home rule law that would prohibit developers building homes on minimal maintenance roads, which the town would then have to maintain ... with little tax money to do so, based on a population 924 residents in 2020.

With more publicly owned land than privately owned land, he said, "Our tax base is small and our taxes are high." That's why he's so dedicated to getting the most out of funds.

### Busy Man

As much as he enjoys his home, the busy superintendent said he doesn't see a lot of it. Always on the go, Joe is president of the county association, a member of the New York Association of Town Superintendents of Highways Executive committee and a member of the local volunteer fire department.

Crammed into a schedule of two 12-hour shifts (7-7) in the winter and 6 a.m.-4:30 p.m. in the summer, he and his crew maintain the grounds at the municipal building and the park downtown, and they clean the cemeteries once a year. In addition, they assist the towns of Worth and Adams and Jefferson County with dust control and road work, and he does hauling for any towns that need help. "It's our job to help people," he said.

His wife said he's "hardworking and committed, always looking to do what's best for the taxpayers."

Most people stereotype employees in the public sector as lazy, Joe believes. He's changing that stereotype. "Coming from the private sector, I know what it's like to work to eat."

Perhaps that's why he's so cognizant of spending taxpayer dollars wisely and why he works so hard to serve the residents.

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To achieve that, he's focused on better road construction practices and reestablishing some minimal maintenance roads to better standard.

"I believe in fixing things from the bottom-up. Just like in construction, you have to start with the foundation," said the former self-employed carpenter. "In roads, you need a good base and proper drainage.

"You have to know the difference between a job and a duty," he added. "Fixing the roads is the job. Doing the best you can do at the highest level for the taxpayer is the duty. Complacency is terrible. People are paying attention."

### Go With the Flow

"Every day is a good day," Joe said. "It's a pleasure to go to work."

While he's thankful for a good relationship with the town board, he recognizes that he works for the people, not the board. That's uppermost in his mind every day.

While he said he thoroughly enjoys all aspects of the job, solving problems and making forward progress are his favorite parts of it.

"I've built a crew I can trust. We may be working on a reprofile job on Monday and a ditching job on Thursday. In between, we could have an equipment breakdown. My guys are able to get the equipment up and running and ready for the next job."

His third term expires in 2026. Highly in demand, the popular superintendent could have his pick of jobs, but for now, at least, Joe is happy at home. With retirement too far off to consider, he has already calculated the number of terms he could fulfill before that day arrives. (It's five.)

Whenever he ultimately hangs up his hardhat, Joe hopes he leaves behind structure and systems that will serve the taxpayers, and a legacy of hard work and dedication to the job and to the people.

"I'm thankful for my guys and appreciate their dedication," he said. "Without them, we can't accomplish anything." ■ P