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Reiherzer cements his place in union's history

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Tom Reiherzer will retire at the age of 59 from his post as business manager of the Plasterers and Cement Masons Local 599 on Feb. 1.

That's four years later than he planned, and the economic issues that delayed his retirement will continue to challenge the pension and health-care systems he created for Local 599.

"My goal was to retire at 55," he said, "but the stock market didn't help me any in 2000, 2001 and 2002, and then health care didn't help at all."

Reiherzer's retirement lets Terry Ullsperger, Local 599's financial secretary, take the reins for 2008's contract renegotiations. Reiherzer, who is also president of the Southeastern Wisconsin Building and Construction Trades Council, said every contract, save heavy highway construction, will open for renegotiation this spring.

"Five years ago, just about our whole raise went to health care," Reiherzer said. "It was about a \$1.35-an-hour increase."

The difficulties won't go away, but Reiherzer said he'll sleep well during his retirement knowing his leadership from 1994 through 2007 set the local on a good course. Under his tenure, it expanded from Kenosha and Racine counties to represent workers across the state.

"We were just about broke when I took over, but currently we have an 18-month reserve," he said. "We just didn't have a good rapport with our contractors. We have great rapport with our contractors now."

John Camosy, president of Camosy Inc., Kenosha, took some time off from his vacation Monday to talk about Reiherzer's work, especially the time he spends improving schools and children's programs through the Kenosha YMCA.

"Clearly, he'll do whatever he needs to do to get the job done," Camosy said. "We're going to miss him."

Reiherzer started Local 599's practice of collecting dues from members' paychecks and made them members of the Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades Council's \$1.4 billion pension fund. He said he spent a lot of time convincing the union's older members about the benefits of the pension program.

"The attitude of the old membership was, 'We can save our own money,'" Reiherzer said.

But after hearing arguments for the pension fund, Reiherzer said, they understood the benefits.

The increased dues helped Reiherzer set up apprenticeship programs in Racine and Kenosha counties and build Local 599's training center in Madison. The union set aside money to build a new 8,000 — to 10,000-square-foot training center and union hall in Milwaukee County. He said union reps are looking for potential sites.

"We've been pretty fortunate," he said, "with the work in Milwaukee and Madison to be able to put out a lot of apprentices."

Reiherzer said the union's membership will be in good hands with Ullsperger. Reiherzer also thanked the colleagues he worked alongside while heading Local 599.

"I took it very seriously," he said. "I knew decisions I made affected them and their families."