Science Societies

From the lab and field to city hall

Agronomist-Turned-Mayor Gurdip Brar Transitions to Public Service

By Susan V. Fisk

June 18, 2020

Gurdip and Dorothy Brar near one of the retention ponds of the Tiedemans Pond conservation area. This kettle pond was one Brar helped remediate, even before becoming mayor. It is home to sandhill cranes, purple martins, and many other plant and animal species. Photo by S.V. Fisk.

Gurdip Brar has held many titles in his career as an agronomist: senior research geneticist, professor, and agronomist. A long-time ASA and CSSA member, he's presented at our Annual Meeting and published in journals. Today, however, you are more likely to find him at Middleton City Hall in Wisconsin where is he serving his second term as mayor.

Brar holds six U.S. patents with research teams and has authored several book chapters. He has also been an author on more than 50 research publications. Academic service and a job at Agracetus Campus (part of Monsanto) brought Brar, and his wife, Dorothy, to Middleton almost four decades ago. At Agracetus, he did plant biotechnology research for 21 years, coordinating research projects in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Spain, and France and at multiple locations within the U.S.

So, clearly, his job in agronomy and plant genetics was going well. What led Brar to become the mayor of a city of about 21,000 citizens just outside the Wisconsin State Capitol of Madison?

- **Q:** What started your path toward public service?
- **A:** In 2002, I cofounded Friends of Kettle Ponds, a nature conservancy group, to make and keep the ponds in Middleton, WI enjoyable and beautiful. Over the years,

we have worked with the city to build a path around two of the ponds, including boardwalks.

- **Q:** First, you ran, and won a seat on Middleton's City Council. What led you to do this community service?
- **A:** Serving others was instilled in me while growing up. I got involved with Middleton Cross Plains Area Schools when my daughter started in kindergarten in 1985. We discovered that programs for accelerated learning were lacking. I was elected chair of the Gifted and Talented Committee and helped start programs to challenge students in K-12 levels. This led to my joining committees on Technology, Math and Science, Long-Range Planning, and many more. When my son joined Cub Scouts, I became a Scout leader, and I'm still involved, 30 years later.

In summary, when the community needed someone to help, whatever the cause, I was there to help.

Over 28 years ago, I joined the Middleton Kiwanis club. In the process, I helped start Kiwanis Key Clubs at three area high schools. These clubs teach high school students about leadership and community service. I helped organize events for the Kiwanis Clubs in the Madison area to work together to beautify Dane County's Vilas Park Zoo by landscaping and planting flowers. This zoo does not charge admission and cannot afford to hire staff to do landscaping work; this work, in one part of the zoo, is done by Kiwanis.

When I was elected to the City Council in 2008, my passion to serve all citizens became even stronger. It became my habit to walk around the city ***and ask citizens how could I help them, rather than waiting for the citizens to come to me.*** (Brar is known for being present at school concerts, games, and other events as well as

gardening in public spaces in his personal time.)

- **Q:** You ran for mayor of Middleton in 2017 and won. What was your first term like? How was it different from being on the Council?

  A: City Council alders are mainly responsible for their own district of about 2,500 people. The mayor must address the needs of the entire city. I work with the alders to meet the needs of their constituents. The mayor must make many compromises, and there are many sleepless nights when things are not turning out as you expected or they are moving too slowly.

During my first term, I delivered on my campaign promises. For example, when I became the mayor in 2017, our roads were terrible. During the past three years, our main roads have been repaired (in many cases, rebuilt).

My plan for this term is to complete the projects I had started. This requires working with the City Council, city staff, city committees, other area leaders, and the citizens. The mayor also has an opportunity to work with area mayors on issues of common interest.

- **Q:** You were faced with an unprecedented flood in 2018.[1] You have led teams to get much of the damage fixed and have plans for future prevention. How does your background as a scientist help inform your work in policy?
- **A:** Due to this flooding, some of our goals for my first term got pushed back. As a scientist, I use my analytical skills to examine various facets of the problems and identify potential solutions.

Just as in science, I do not hesitate to ask opinions of multiple people with diverse background and experiences. In fact, I welcome others' constructive input. I try to look

at the bigger picture: immediate needs versus long-term goals. I have a good understanding of the impact of flooding on soil, crops, vegetation, farmers, and businesses; and I try to apply my experience and knowledge to my job. This has proven very helpful.

- **Q:** What did you value about your membership in the Societies?
- **A:** Joining ASA and CSSA, in 1971, was a great decision on my part. The Annual Meeting provided me an opportunity to network with graduate students, researchers, and world-renowned agronomists. ASA publications, including the *Crop Science*, publish high quality research. [Society] members are highly respected around the globe.

The Brars have two adult children and two grandchildren. Both of their children are scientists: Daughter Gloria is Professor of Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of California–Berkeley. Son Victor is a Professor of Physics at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Bridging the Gap between Science and Policy

As an agronomist turned mayor, Gurdip Brar can use his science background to help inform good policy. However, most of our policymakers don't have science backgrounds and are looking for good information from scientists like you. Last summer, the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Science Policy Office launched a new advocacy program, The Scientists Engaging and Educating Decision-makers (SEED) Ambassador Award, to help you become that trusted resource. Learn more by reading the article in this issue on p. 27 or at **https://doi.org/10.1002/csan.20202**.

More people articles

Back to issue

Back to home