

► To the point

It's time to start trying to heal the wounds left by a divisive battle over development issues in the southern Monroe County community.

Repairing the damage in Bedford community

No matter how its outcome is perceived, the battle over rezoning of the Whitman property in Bedford Township has been a costly one.

Aside from the legal costs and the mental anguish for all involved, the dispute has cost dearly in terms of that priceless commodity known as public trust.

Bedford residents on all sides of the issue understandably feel a sense of betrayal. Some have lost faith in the judicial system after a court ruling essentially nullified a voter referendum on the issue. Some officials don't feel as if they can trust some residents anymore. Some residents feel their best interests have been compromised by political whim.

For those who haven't been following the dispute — which had its beginnings more than a decade ago — it was a classic clash between the interests of business and residential development.

It came to a head in 2003, when the Whitman family, who own a Ford dealership, asked the township to rezone the northern half of their property to C-3 so it could accommodate development such as a Walmart store. The site is adjacent to Indian Acres, a large subdivision, and many residents felt a large-scale commercial development would ruin their quality of life. Others welcomed the idea, suggesting a large retailer would be a boon to the area.

The dispute ended up in court after the township denied a rezoning for the project. Although the court ruling upheld the township's actions, it also concluded that the township zoning law does not exclude big box

stores such as a Walmart.

The Whitman family subsequently modified its rezoning request and the township board agreed to it. But a citizen referendum overturned the action.

In late January, the court overturned the referendum. Despite some testimony to the contrary, the matter presently appears moot, since development no longer appears imminent given that the weak economy has sapped wind from the sails of many developers, and Walmart's fortunes have been flagging.

Regardless, Bedford Township officials recently agreed that they would not appeal the most recent court decision because there appears to be no likelihood of prevailing.

Some have suggested that this finally ends a dispute that ran on too long.

But it seems that much more work lies ahead to avoid future conflict.

First, the township needs to take another look at its zoning and planning regulations to ensure that they embody principles that encourage reasonable development, safeguard the quality of life, and don't trample on individual property rights.

The community also needs to erase any lingering misconceptions that the overall mood in the township is "anti-development."

Furthermore, all parties should work to restore some trust. That's a tall order, of course, but if everyone understands that a divided or divisive community is not a desirable community to anyone, they might be able to find common ground for furthering the common good.