

Guest Column for the Leavenworth Times

Dec. 8, 2020 by Mayor Mike Griswold

For the past year it has been an honor to serve as Mayor of the First City of Kansas. Needless to say, 2020 has not been a typical year because of the COVID-19 health crisis. Much of my time as Mayor has been devoted to leading Leavenworth through this crisis, which unfortunately is still with us. The purpose of this column, my last as Mayor, is twofold: highlight the actions taken by the City Commission and staff in response to the crisis, and review progress on many of the priorities for Leavenworth that I laid out in my columns from January and February.

The first change in City plans occurred in mid-March with the cancellation of the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade. Looking back at our communications at the time, it is interesting how little we knew, and how rapidly the country, state, county and our City Government learned, and then adapted to the pandemic. Initially, the City closed City Hall to the public and suspended select City services such as the brush site and recycling center. Next, we began listening closely to subject matter experts like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and the Leavenworth County Health Officer. In listening, the City was able to learn of protocols to keep citizens, staff, and vendors healthy and safe while at City-owned facilities. Thus, in May we reopened City Hall to citizens wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, and reactivated the City's brush site and recycling operations at the Maintenance Service Center.

In late March I began a dialogue with Leavenworth residents at my first of what turned out to be 17 Facebook Live Town Halls held throughout the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis. As I mentioned at this first virtual Town Hall, “the overriding priority of the City Commission, City Manager, and City staff [was] to do everything possible to assure the health, safety, and welfare of all Leavenworth citizens.” In focusing on this priority I went on to say that “we [would] share pertinent and accurate information relating to COVID-19, adjust the delivery of City services [as required], and as much as possible advocate for our small businesses which [were] taking the brunt of the state and local government actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.”

In sharing information my approach was to review the COVID-19 metrics at the state and county level, including Leavenworth and the other four cities, to ascertain whether the spread of the disease was getting better, worse, or staying about the same. From late March to early July I highlighted pertinent state and county health orders since they frequently changed as health officials learned more about the disease, and elected office holders started making decisions on what they thought was best for their constituents in the midst of a pandemic. I also made sure that citizens and business owners were aware of the main provisions of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump on March 27th 2020. Two of these provisions were the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to provide small businesses and eligible non-profit organizations with the fiscal resources they needed to stay in business, and financial assistance for state, local, and tribal governments navigating the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis.

During a few of my Facebook Live Town Halls I spent time outlining key points of the PPP application process, which was administered by the Small Business Administration. During one such town hall I had a guest subject matter expert, Mr. Will Katz, Director of the KU Small Business Development Center, Lawrence, Kansas explain the “ins and outs” of the application process, including the key role played by our community’s bankers working with their small business clients. I also let our citizens know that the Leavenworth Main Street organization was playing a vital role in communicating information about the PPP to Downtown businesses. According to LCDC Executive Director, Mr. Steve Jack, there were 591 entities in Leavenworth County, mostly small businesses, but also some non-profits, that applied for and were awarded PPP low interest – 1% – loans amounting to \$18,184,892. \$8,869,591 of that figure went to City of Leavenworth companies. 3,106 jobs were retained through these loans in Leavenworth County, with 1,465 of those retained in the City of Leavenworth. I also highlighted during a couple of Town Halls the key points associated with small businesses and non-profits applying for forgiveness of their PPP loans.

Regarding the financial assistance provided to state and local governments under the CARES Act, the City has received about 75% of its allocated amount. The Commission decided to set aside at least \$250,000 for a COVID-19 Relief Small Business Grant Award Program. This program began on November 25th with web-based applications flowing in at a brisk rate. To offset business expenses and/or revenue loss incurred because of COVID-19, small businesses can be awarded up to \$5,000. Last week, the City awarded the first 22 business relief grants totaling \$87,000.

Grant application review and award of funds will occur every Wednesday until the \$250,000 is exhausted.

Finally, last month, another \$325,000 of CARES Act funds received by the City were awarded in grants to 15 community service organizations. This action continues the work of the City Commission to provide available funds to organizations which help citizens in need. Back in July the City awarded grants totaling \$78,000 through the federal government's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program to Welcome Central, Leavenworth Salvation Army, and Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas. Assistance helped with rent, mortgage, and utility payments. Organizations gave payments directly to landlords, banks, and utilities on behalf of residents. There is still \$108,897 left in these COVID-19 related CDBG funds, which will be awarded to community service organizations pending release by the federal government.

Even with the focus on the COVID-19 health crisis the City moved forward in 2020 to accomplish the priorities I outlined in my columns from last January and February. As promised, road funding received a well-needed "shot in the arm," increasing to \$2 million, an increase of \$700,000 over previous years. Coupled with the completion of South 20th Street Trafficway in 2019, the City actually had an additional \$1,300,000 to work with in 2020. As part of an aggressive Pavement Management Program, almost six miles of streets and roads were renovated/refurbished/repaved, including completing the Thornton Street project between 5th Street and 10th Avenue which used a separate funding source in addition to the Pavement Management Program. Finally, the City received a \$1 million grant from Kansas Department of Transportation in 2020 to renovate/refurbish/repave 4th Street through the downtown.

The grant covers the cost of this work from Choctaw to Shawnee Streets. Grant design work on these iconic four blocks will start in 2021.

In its second year of execution the City's Stormwater Management Program went well, with a couple of major projects completed: Independence Court, and 2nd Ave and Limit Street in the vicinity of Cody Park, as well as several "orange fence projects." Preparatory and easement work began on the 2nd and Chestnut Streets, and Phase II South 16th Terrace projects, respectively. These major projects are scheduled for completion in 2021.

As it does annually, the Commission reviewed and made decisions on approximately 25 unsafe and blighted residential properties within the City. Over the better part of 2020, about half of these property owners corrected the documented problems, while the remaining properties have either been demolished, or will be by year's end.

Economic development within the City is picking up steam with the start a few months ago of the Fort Gate Redevelopment Project along Metropolitan Avenue in northeast Leavenworth. A new Starbucks opened on 4th Street at the former Payless Shoe Store location, and a new Trademark by Wyndham Hotel is under construction Downtown at the site of the former Immaculata High School. And, Price Chopper has begun a \$12-million-dollar renovation project of its Leavenworth store, with completion scheduled for late spring.

Another indicator of economic growth in Leavenworth is the demand for housing. The City issued more permits for single family residences this year than we have in a

decade. Along with the 101-lot West Glen development and 11-lot Moonlight Lake development, the City has received preliminary plans for an additional 80 single family lots, with construction scheduled to start in 2021.

Announced last spring, the \$365 million commitment from the Federal Government to build a new prison to replace the current U.S. Penitentiary (USP) in Leavenworth represents a continuation of the City's century (+) long relationship with our great federal partner, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). This project will bring a large number of construction jobs to Leavenworth, which will spur economic activity. Upon completion of the project in 2024 or early 2025, the permanent BOP workforce at the USP, fellow members of our community, will begin performing their duties in the new facility.

The top priority for the Commission in 2020 was implementing the process to develop a 2030 Comprehensive Land Use Plan for the City. A year ago we selected a firm, Shockey Consulting out of Lenexa, Kansas, to help facilitate the City's work. Despite all the challenges associated with COVID-19 Shockey and the City have been able to engage stakeholders and give them opportunities to provide input and feedback. I expect Shockey to provide the City the final deliverable – a comprehensive plan that will guide the development and redevelopment of Leavenworth for the next 10 years – in first quarter of 2021.

As my year as Mayor ends, let me thank Leavenworth residents for your support of the City Commission and hard work of the City staff. The first few months of 2021 will continue to challenge all of us to reduce the spread of the virus. Avoiding groups,

wearing masks, socially distancing, washing hands, and sanitizing surfaces will still be necessary. Hopefully, by the second quarter of 2021 the COVID-19 vaccine will become broadly available to Americans, and we can start getting back to normal.