

Kelly Gildner asked me to write a special column for my last one. I preferred to think that all my columns were special. So she asked me to write one extra special; ok, I got the point.

I've accepted a position with Bath Township, Michigan. My last day working for Evansville is this Friday, and this is my last column. So it will be a little about Bath (there have been obvious questions). And it will be a little about me (it is my column). But it will mostly be about Evansville (after all, it is supposed to be extra special).

Bath, Michigan

When I first visited Bath in October to see whether I wanted to apply for the job and live there, people waved. I was a stranger, with out-of-state license plates, driving around neighborhoods to get a first impression of the community. And twice people out for a walk waved as if I was a neighbor from down the block. It may sound corny, but I really liked the friendliness.

Bath has a strong agricultural heritage, and much of its geography remains rural. But it is close to the state capitol in Lansing and next door to Michigan State University in East Lansing. It has a variety of housing from rental to starter homes to step-up and high-end single family houses. It has market-driven commercial development. There is an extensive wildlife area within the township, a shallow recreational lake, and several golf courses.

When I worked in Minnesota, my position was as a shared administrator for three cities; we also worked closely with the county; and we were active in a lobbying partnership for major highway improvements across a half dozen counties. I have missed this degree of intergovernmental collaboration. So I look forward to Bath's collaboration with other government entities for water and sewer service as well as a strong regional entity for economic development.

Here's an interesting set of statistics: in the 2010 census, Michigan was the only state in the country to lose population, but the Lansing tri-county region was one of two regions in the state to gain population. And Bath Township had a 54% increase in population.

Bath is poised for continued residential and commercial growth. One of the challenges which I'll assist is its Downtown Development Authority. The DDA is working to redevelop its small downtown and tie it to the nearby interstate. The goal is to create a sense of place, so you recognize that you are entering Bath when you pull off the interstate.

And Bath is only an hour's drive from my parents in Grand Rapids. I was not looking to return to Michigan, but sometimes it is very nice how things work out.

Lake Leota

In one interview, I was asked about my "favorite capital project." This struck me as one of the strangest questions I'd been asked; who has a favorite capital project? Well, I do.

Before the lake dredging project I was skeptical; it was a lot of money to spend on a park. But we held an advisory referendum, and Evansville voted better than two to one in favor of it. I'm very glad they did. Many people were involved in our lake project, not the least of whom were the Save Our Lake Environment (SOLE) group. And I was duly impressed during the ribbon

cutting ceremony when Mayor Sandy Decker asked people to raise their hands if they remembered learning to swim in the lake, or camping out as Girl Scouts in the park, or playing or watching high school football games beside the lake. It was obvious the lake meant fond memories for all generations in Evansville.

I delight now when I visit the park and see kids and parents fishing by the dam or the Boy Scouts practicing their kayaking. And what a beautiful backdrop for all the ballgames! And the picnics, and the dog walkers, and the birders, and disc golf has been active recently, and there's even a small group that does early morning yoga in the park.

Quality of Life

Lake Leota and its park may be the most visible example of Evansville's quality of life, but it is not the only one. A couple years ago, we conducted a tourism assessment with the Wisconsin Department of Tourism. The report recommended capitalizing on the local experience, especially our historic buildings and architecture and small town charm.

We also have significant natural features such as the Evansville Wildlife Area, nearby Magnolia Bluff, and possibly a stop along the Ice Age Trail. We have events that draw visitors, most notably the Fourth of July and recently the Civil War Commemoration, and numerous local events such as the Energy Fair, Rally in the Alley, and Ice Cream Social. We have Lake Leota and other parks bustling with recreation throughout the community. Creekside Place has quickly become a very active community center. And we have a very respected school system.

These are only a few aspects of Evansville's quality of life. But they are worth highlighting because of their importance in community-building and Evansville's sense of identity.

When I started here seven years ago, I valued the parks and architecture. But I saw them as extras. I really saw the city's role more as basic services: streets, police, and sewer and water. Something like the Youth Center might be nice and serve a need in the community, but I really didn't see it as a priority for city business.

But my job is not about me; it is about the community – which means setting aside my opinions in respect for the community's expectations. And I've grown to greater appreciate the priority of a strong quality of life in managing a city. Sometimes this is directly provided by the city government, other times it is supported for others to provide, or sometimes it may mean staying out of the way so others can implement without interference. In any case, the quality of life is essential in defining the community and cannot be discounted.

In the Youth Center's case, I'm very pleased at how it has really grown in the number of kids served and the quality of programming and activities over the last few years.

Volunteering

I have often commented about being continually impressed by our residents' engagement in the community. Evansville has a deep well of volunteers who give of their time and talent; this truly is unique. Personally, I have enjoyed volunteering at the Fourth of July, Chili Cookoff, Civil

War Sesquicentennial, Ice Cream Social, school facility and strategic planning, museum docent, and t-ball coach.

I haven't played since t-ball myself. But I coached the past three years. It may be the city's program, and I may handle a fair amount of the team rosters and game schedules, but I very much saw myself as another volunteer when coaching. It was about caring for Evansville and doing the right thing. And I was proud to show off wearing my team t-shirt at a couple city committee meetings either right before or immediately after one of our games.

Transparency

I recently spoke with former mayor Bob Olson. He thanked me for my work keeping people informed. Where the average resident may take it for granted, Bob has the advantage of an insider's perspective. He recognized that transparency and openness can be difficult but is the best for the community. It is a matter of integrity.

State law requires our city council and committee meetings to be public and properly noticed. We go beyond the minimum requirements by emailing notices and posting them online. We have cancelled meetings when a notice was accidentally missed. We have paid painstaking attention to answering questions and providing information. We have maintained changes in city ordinances on the website on a monthly basis. I realize there are certainly people who'd like more, and there is always room for improvement – but we have emphasized transparency and information.

The mayor and I write these columns in The Evansville Review. Sometimes they provide basic straightforward information such as starting today Wednesday, April 16, the yard waste disposal site is now open Wednesdays from 5:00 to 7:00 and Saturdays from 9:00 to 2:30 throughout the summer, weather permitting. But most of the time I see the columns as an inside baseball perspective on what we're doing at city hall whether it is budgeting, strategic planning, or lean operations.

Continuous Improvement

City leadership has been emphasizing continuous improvement. We have used the terms Top-Notch Service and Drive for Excellence. By Top-Notch Service we mean providing basic services at a high level. This includes best management practices and professionalism. Closely related to Top-Notch Service is a Drive for Excellence. It takes a long-view with an emphasis on improving operations and service. It is a commitment for improvement and looking past the status quo.

An example that reflects both of these is at city hall. We used to have a split "finance department" with some responsibilities vesting with the Clerk/Treasurer and other responsibilities vesting with the Finance Director. It resulted in an artificial division between the office employees – depending on which supervisor they reported to, they were either City or Water & Light.

We have worked hard to get past such a silo mentality. At city hall we have done cross training, so several employees are familiar and able to help with a particular request or task. And we've

done some customer service training. We have also formally eliminated the split department, aligning all the fiscal duties under the Finance Director position. We communicate freely and hold regular staff meetings to make sure staff are working together on issues.

And in our staff meetings, we've come up with other ideas to improve our service. For example, something as small as keeping notes in the billing system to have a history goes a great ways toward resolving future issues or questions with a customer. Or, for example, with an upgrade to our accounting software, we also consolidated our accounting systems to streamline operations and eliminate duplicative effort.

The staff and city council pay deliberate attention to taking a long-view of the city's operations. This is a continuous process, with regular assessment and improvement, to ensure Evansville remains a successful community even with the complexities of our social, financial, and political environments.

A Distinct Honor

Thank you for the past seven years; it has been a distinct honor and pleasure to work here. And I am a better manager for having worked in Evansville.