

Mayor's Column for the January 1, 2014, Edition of the Evansville Review

Better Together: A Reprise

Happy New Year Evansville!

The month of December is typically very busy, but it is also ripe for reflection. As I contemplated this column, several of the meetings and gatherings I attended last month brought focus to my thoughts. In 2013, Evansville became better because of numerous collaborative efforts of citizens, organizations, schools, businesses, and city.

The disc golf course installed at Leonard-Leota Park this fall is extremely popular. A collaborative effort of a small group of citizens, the Park Board, Historic Preservation Commission, Wisconsin Historical Society, city, and local businesses, along with funds from the Robert J. Antes Leota Park Fund and additional private fundraising, accomplished this project.

The long-awaited bathrooms at West Side Park were completed this summer. Collaboration of Rob Kostroun's High School Building Trades Class, school district, local businesses, the Park Board, and city, made this happen.

Little Free Libraries have arrived in Evansville. Five libraries were built and installed as an Eagle Scout project of Keith Hartje. The Woodchucks are assisting the youth with construction of these wonderful structures. Nine additional Libraries are being located around the city by interested citizens, with funding support by an Evansville Fund award.

BASE (Building A Safer Evansville) completed its first year of successful effort. \$125,000 in local funding and in-kind contributions by citizens, businesses, organizations, and city, matched \$125,000 of federal grant funds to provide awareness and activities focused on reducing drug and alcohol abuse in our youth.

The Civil War cannon restoration was spearheaded by the Grove Society and Baker Manufacturing Company, with collaboration of the city, Historic Preservation Commission, Wisconsin Historical Society, and funds and contributions from many individuals, businesses, and organizations, including the Wahlin Foundation, the Evansville Fund, The Millie Tait Charitable Fund, the E. Susan Eager Fund, and Blackhawk Questers.

A small group of interested citizens overseeing the Bird City Wisconsin project obtained a Bird Watching Kit this spring that includes 15 sets of binoculars, a scope, and reference materials. The kit is available for local use to encourage nature-related recreation. The kit has been used by more than 500 students and scouts since April, with training provided by local birders and naturalists.

The list of collaborations goes on: Antes Cabin restoration; SOLE (Save Our Lake Environment) fish stocking of Lake Leota; Evansville Jays improvements to the Upper Ball Diamond at Leonard-Leota Park; initial development of the Evansville Peace Garden at Seminary Park; Montana Leggett's Eagle Scout project at Maple Hill Cemetery; events like the Fourth of July celebration, Energy Fair, and Chili Cook-off. This list is by no means complete. In Evansville, collaborative efforts make a difference!

Over the years I have spoken and written about local collaborations on numerous occasions. I have talked of the rich volunteer resources in Evansville. A few years ago I wrote about a book I had read, "Better Together: Restoring the American Community," co-authored by Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein. Putnam is Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. Feldstein and Putnam co-chair the Saguario Seminar, an ongoing civic engagement initiative.

I pulled "Better Together" from my bookshelf and re-read the conclusion to refresh my memory on the concept of social capital. The authors define social capital as "powerful networks of relationships that weave individuals into groups and communities." Effective communities are those with abundant social capital. Putnam and Feldstein believe that social capital is incremental and cumulative, and can be increased "by creating networks of networks . . . by nesting smaller groups within larger, more encompassing ones." This multistrandedness (so named by sociologists), layers of connections that intersect and overlap, reinforces community engagement and sense of place.

Putnam and Feldstein, in undertaking numerous case studies, recognized the importance of shared space for building community in each instance. "Better Together" concludes that social-capital building will depend on the ability to create spaces to encourage the development of "dense webs of encounter and participation."

During a difficult recession, the Evansville community built Creekside Place at a location in the heart of our community. It is a vibrant, busy facility that is used by dozens of local groups and organizations. It is used for weddings, anniversaries, reunions, trainings, seminars, exercise classes, and elections.

It is also our dedicated space for building social capital. On Saturday, January 18, Creekside Place will host the Evansville Activity Fair from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. It will showcase many of our local organizations that enhance and improve our community. Mark your calendars to come and learn about current and new projects and activities. It is a tremendous opportunity for building networks of networks!

As this year begins, I ask you to do two things for the future of Evansville. First, attend the Activity Fair and share your ideas and show support for making Evansville better. Second, watch your mail in the next couple of weeks. Every city household will receive a survey that we encourage you to complete and return. Survey results will assist the city Plan Commission and Common Council in developing the best future for Evansville.

Community Announcements

2014 ballfield and park shelter reservations will be accepted beginning on January 2 during regular business hours at City Hall.

Christmas trees will be collected by Public Works personnel starting on January 2, time and weather permitting. Trees should be placed on the terrace, with all tinsel, wire, ornaments, and other material removed. Do not bag your tree.

Evansville historian Ruth Ann Montgomery will talk about Evansville's photographic studios at the January 2 meeting of the Evansville Genealogy Group at Eager Free Public Library, 39 West Main Street. The 6:00 p.m. meeting is free and open to the public. The studio name and its years of operation can be a useful tool in dating family photographs.

Author Sherry Derr-Wille will discuss writing mysteries in her presentation at Eager Free Public Library, 39 West Main Street, on January 7 at 5:30 p.m.

BASE (Building A Safer Evansville), Evansville Police Department, and Rock County Sheriff's Department are holding a community drug awareness presentation on Wednesday, January 8, 2014, from 7-9 p.m. at the Evansville High School Performing Arts Center, 640 South Fifth Street. Learn about Evansville's Social Host Ordinance, local prescription drug abuse, illicit drug use, and area gang activity.

The annual Wacky Invention Contest will be held at the January 8, 2014, meeting of the Evansville Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club. The fun begins at 6:30 p.m. at Creekside Place, 102 Maple Street.

Beer School 201 will be held January 13, 2014, at 6:30 p.m. at Creekside Place. Learn about different styles of beers. Open to those 21 years of age and older.

The 2nd Annual Evansville Activity Fair will be held on Saturday, January 18, 2014, beginning at 9:00 a.m. at Creekside Place. Learn about the many Evansville organizations and their community efforts and activities; these groups make our community stronger and better.

The Evansville Youth Center was awarded \$1,400 in funding for 2014 by the United Way Blackhawk Region.

Watch your mail in January for the community-wide resident survey that will guide drafting of the update to our city's smart growth comprehensive plan. We want active citizen input in development of the best future for Evansville. UW-Oshkosh has been hired to collect, analyze, and report survey results.

Community Congratulations/Thanks

Evansville thanks the United Methodist Church congregation for their generous Youth Center donations of snacks, cooking supplies, and food and craft gift cards. Our children will greatly enjoy these contributions to the Center.

Our community congratulates and thanks Dave Wartenweiler as he begins retirement this weekend. Dave began working in Evansville in 1986, providing local building inspection services. We wish for him many future great rounds of golf and enjoyable trips to the Frozen Four!