Mayor's Column for November 11, 2009 Evansville Review

At last month's League of Wisconsin Municipalities Annual Conference, the opening session included a compelling presentation by John Luthy, president of The Futures Corporation of Boise, Idaho. Luthy provided a frank, sobering assessment of the future of municipal government. He had the full attention of the audience—you could have heard a pin drop in the room that was filled with more than 200 people.

Luthy identified trends occurring at the global, U.S., community, and local government departmental levels. Some global trends are:

- economic forces that are overtaking political forces;
- insufficient foresight regarding sustainability;
- competition for natural resources, specifically oil and water; and
- greater and increasing communication and technology.

U.S. trends Luthy discussed include:

- an aging population that is growing;
- a contracting economy and more competition;
- declining access to natural resources;
- lagging acceptance of change;
- an entitlement culture;
- huge debt, growing costs, and low savings; and
- the tipping point in how to finance local government. At the federal and state levels, **the money is not there.**

Some community government trends that were identified include:

- ever increasing required federal and state mandates;
- tight budgets with reduced capital improvement plans and deferred maintenance;
- higher expectations and growing scrutiny;
- transformational conflict; and
- options for collaboration and consolidation.

Within local government departments are:

- increasing retirements, with loss of institutional memory and work experience/talent;
- more difficult job recruitment and retention; and
- growing task complexity, demands, and scrutiny.

The combination of all of these forces is resulting in impacts that are happening now and are transformational. One example is an observed pull-back into communities. Citizens are searching for security and sense of place.

Luthy points out that the status quo, business as usual, is a prescription for disaster. He posits that local governments must confront reality and plan for a changed future. He believes community vision is an absolute necessity, stating "to the blind, all things are

sudden". Planning for likely future scenarios can provide flexibility for unknowable circumstances.

Local programs and services will need review to determine relevance for the future. Opportunities for collaboration and cooperation must be explored. Old-fashioned volunteerism will be necessary to ensure certain community projects are accomplished. Translation: there is much hard work ahead.

Luthy emphasized that continuous communication with citizens is critical to explain essential change. Communities will need clarity, direction, truth, and harmonious, collaborative leadership to adjust to imminent, effective change.

The program ended with Luthy's description of attributes that are now necessary for local government. Officials will need to be community builders, creators of place, forum providers, planning experts, teachers, and truth tellers. Shoes to be filled are huge and community success will depend on the walk.

Within a week of the conference, the October 19, 2009, "Newsweek" magazine contained an article entitled "There's No Place Like Home" by Joel Kotkin. He writes that an aging population, the pervasive Internet, an increased attention to family, and suburbanization are leading to "new localism". Mobility is decreasing. People are staying in their communities, growing their personal sense of place, and continuing commitments to community organizations and institutions. Kotkin believes these "roots" will deepen and continue to grow.

Kotkin identifies some societal trends. He notes:

- aging boomers are choosing to stay in their homes to remain close to family, friends, churches, and civic groups.
- corporate executives are often choosing to remain in communities that are important to their families. (Pew research indicates that family "trumps money when people make decisions about where to live".)
- the millennial generation is staying close to their families, often because of economic reasons, but also for sense of security, familiarity, and place.
- According to demographer Wendell Cox, by 2015 there will be more people working electronically at home full-time than taking mass transit.

These trends will impact local community development. Civic organizations, local restaurants, life-long education resources, community events and festivals, and parks are some of the local institutions that are important to citizens and will receive additional attention.

New localism "may even influence the course of our future politics," according to Kotkin. He discusses the probability of future increased decentralization of government activity that will provide more choices at the local level.

What does all of this mean for Evansville and our local government? Some efforts to address the multitude of trends and issues are underway.

The 2010 city budget will be completed this week after public hearing. The proposed budget contains a decrease of $.082/$1000 in the mill rate. The current Common Council is sensitive to the stressed pocketbooks of residents. The Council is also committed to maintaining the city's stable financial condition. At a focus group meeting I attended (see below), I learned that 350+ villages and cities out of the approximately 600 in our state have no operating fund reserve. To say this is a serious situation is an understatement. Evansville is fortunate that our Council over the years has consistently recognized the necessity of preserving a conservative reserve for our community's financial safety and security.

Community commitment to sustainability will make Evansville a better place to live, as well as reduce energy costs through energy efficiency, energy conservation, and renewable energy initiatives. We are seen as state leaders in our commitment to energy independence.

Evansville has been hard at work on community development the past several years. The relocations of our fire district, EMS department, and police department into facilities that will accommodate community growth for the foreseeable future were wise investment decisions. Recent infrastructure projects like the Main Street reconstruction and the Wastewater Treatment Plant upgrade put us in good position for the coming lean budget years. Residents spoke loudly for "sense of place" via the referendum on the dredging of Lake Leota. Community groups continue improvements with the renovation of the Baker Office Building and establishment of a school/community forest. Citizens are committed to additional efforts to make our community a special place. A capital campaign to build Creekside Place, a community/senior center that will provide new opportunities for community sharing, will soon be underway.

Discussions of local government collaboration and cooperation are occurring. Later this month I will speak, along with Larry Arft, City Manager of Beloit, to the Janesville Sustainability Committee. The new Committee is interested in learning about the sustainability initiatives and support in the Beloit and Evansville communities as they begin their planning.

By invitation, last week I participated in one of four focus group meetings around the state that was sponsored by the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Alliance of Cities, and the Wisconsin Towns Association. A consultant, Baker Tilly, was engaged to assess the Wisconsin governmental and economic climate and research relevant successful approaches and initiatives in other states. The focus group included the Portage, Dodge, and Grant County board chairs, mayors from Monona, Lancaster, Evansville, Stoughton, and Sun Prairie, the village president of Potosi, the city manager of Whitewater, the city administrator of Lake Geneva, Town of Springfield and Bristol board chairs, and a representative from the small business section of the Wisconsin Department of Commerce.

The focus group discussed the most common collaborations among local governments, which are fire protection, emergency medical services, library services, and police protection. We discussed limitations on the financial flexibility of local Wisconsin governments, such as maintenance of service requirements in our budgeting and increasing unfunded state and federal mandates while capping tax revenues. We discussed the Wisconsin wage deficiencies in comparison to other Midwestern states and its impacts leading to talent and business migration out of state. The group of officials unanimously reported no direct benefits to regional economic development participation because local incentives are obtained by successful competition, not collaboration. Benefit structures need examination and revision before true regional economic development activities become successful. The focus group will be meeting again for further discussion.

We live in challenging, remarkable times. If I only had a dollar of each time I heard the work "unprecedented" in this last year. There is no roadmap going forward—we need to draw one. There are opportunities springing from this environment. A strong municipal government is critical at this time.

Our local government represents each of us. Communication and understanding are essential. My columns have been long recently, but the information is important to our community. Our city government and I are committed to being responsive to citizen ideas and comments. Let us hear from you.

Energy Saving Tip

As I replaced a burnt-out light bulb with an energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulb in my kitchen recently, I decided to take inventory of the CFLs we are using. The number is now 22, and there are many more possibilities. For general information, the incremental energy used by upgrading to a 50" plasma television (the Deckers do not own one) is equivalent to the energy saved by replacing 11 incandescent light bulbs with CFLs.

Community Announcements

The 2010 Chamber of Commerce Coupon Books will be available shortly. They make great gifts with the added benefit of supporting our local businesses.

The city yard will close for the season on the Saturday afternoon of November 21, weather permitting.

As you consider charitable contributions during the coming months, please consider support for our local organizations. I spoke with the Care Closet on Saturday—they have purchased 150 turkeys for Thanksgiving food baskets, at a cost of more than $1000, for our neighbors in need and they have a waiting list. There are opportunities to support AWARE--the Toys for Evansville program will begin shortly and Love Lights can be

purchased for the AWARE Tree in front of City Hall, with donations supporting the year-round work of this worthy organization.

Community Congratulations/Thanks

As I sat in the Colorado Springs airport for a flight home recently, a uniformed young soldier walked into the gate area and sat down. A fellow traveler popped out of his seat, greeted him and simply said, "Thank you for your service to our country". It brought tears to my eyes. I would have done the same thing but I would never have gotten the words out of my mouth before dissolving into tears. As we mourn the tragedy of Fort Hood and recognize the service of our veterans this Veterans Day, please take a personal moment to honor our past and current service personnel. Their sacrifices are great. To our veterans, on behalf of Evansville, thank you for your service to our country.

Last weekend Boy Scout Troop 514 collected items from the community to stock the food pantry of the Care Closet. I thank Evansville residents for your continuous generosity and Troop 514 for your service to our citizens in need.

The Evansville Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club begins its second year at its November 11 meeting at 6:30 p.m. in the Eager Economy Building. Congratulations to the Club for strengthening the Evansville business community with its resources and networking opportunities.

Congratulations to Matthias and Lisa James on the opening of Allen Creek Gallery, a stunning new Main Street retail space. Thank you for your investment in our downtown.