

Mayor's Column for the June 19, 2013, Edition of the Evansville Review

Three years ago I was invited to participate in a focus group of local elected leaders in our area by the Local Government Institute of Wisconsin. The meeting was held at Baker Tilley in Madison and was one of four sessions throughout Wisconsin. The purpose of the group meetings was to explore possible local government collaborations, shared services, and lean opportunities in the existing financial environment.

Our group was about twenty people, including the mayors of Monona, Sun Prairie, Stoughton, and Lancaster, several village presidents, town chairs, and some county officials from the southwestern section of the state. There was an underlying reality that frugal budgets and cost-cutting initiatives were the new normal.

I remember that Lancaster's Mayor Wehrle told about his city's plan to construct a playground two blocks from a school. He worked with his council to readjust its thinking---realization that the same taxpayers would be paying for playgrounds two blocks apart.

This month's "The Municipality," a League of Wisconsin Municipalities publication, includes an article entitled "Ten Habits of Highly-Effective Councils." One of the habits was to respect shared constituencies, i.e. recognizing that many local government agencies are funded by the same citizen pocketbooks.

During recent City Committee of the Whole meetings, the Common Council discussed the value and necessity of increasing intergovernmental relations and communication. This includes the school district, surrounding towns, fire district, and county, state, and federal governments.

Last Monday I attended the Evansville School District Board meeting to communicate the city's desire to explore areas of collaboration. Only endeavors that will be advantageous for all---school, city, and citizen---would be pursued. Here are my comments at the School Board meeting.

"Good evening everyone.

Just over a week ago, on a trip into Milwaukee, I observed a large sign in front of a business along the interstate in the Waukesha area. It said, "Encourage One Another---Build Each other Up." That message resonated with me.

I am here wearing two hats tonight. As mayor I represent the Evansville community. I am also a proud alumnus of the Evansville School District.

I am here to thank you for your service. Your tasks are difficult and challenging. You have made decisions that are uncomfortable and many more face you. On behalf of the city, and especially personally, your efforts are appreciated.

The School District has a progressive tradition. Decades ago, you were early users of trimester scheduling. More recently, the focus on our environment and “green” activities are noteworthy. Over the years a number of people have told me they moved to Evansville because of the reputation of our schools. The District is a valuable community asset.

I encourage the School Board to take the long view, with your decision-making providing the educational foundations that will result in the best futures for Evansville’s children. Take the time to gather the community information necessary to guide your decision-making.

Recognize that advocacy is critical in the current political environment. The City has at least tripled its advocacy efforts in the last couple of years. The erosion of local control is alarming.

Think outside the box. Search for opportunities for collaboration, “lean” operation, possible shared services, and creative use of volunteers.

The lead article in the June issue of “The Municipality,” a publication of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, is entitled “Ten Habits of Highly-Effective Councils.” The second of the ten listed habits is to respect “shared constituencies.”

The author explains that no local government entity “is an island.” The decisions and operations of any one affects all others. Many local jurisdictions are providing services to the same people, often with conflicting and competing individual agendas rather than in a coordinated, integrated manner that provides seamless, efficient services that meet the citizens’ needs. The writer posits that effective councils recognize the necessity of collaboration and integration among entities to ensure that community needs are met.

The Common Council, in discussion at Committee of the Whole strategy sessions over the last year and a half, has determined that it will explore intergovernmental partnerships to enhance efficiency, improve service delivery, and stretch taxpayer dollars. The City is extremely interested in having conversations about identification and implementation of win-win-win, in this case city-district-citizen, collaborative opportunities.

The schools are an integral part of our community. Evansville citizens want the best schools, quality of life, and daily services. It will take all of us working together for successful accomplishment.

Thanks for listening.”

The city has also been strongly encouraging the Evansville Fire District to engage in long-term planning. Change has been occurring in other fire districts in our area. A conversation about and development of a specific plan for delivery of seamless, efficient, quality fire protection in the future is in the best interest of everyone.

Evansville has also increased its involvement at the county, state, and federal levels and these efforts will continue going forward. Just last week a letter was sent to the United States Postal Service to state our opposition to a proposed service consolidation that would eliminate next-day first class mail in Evansville and other communities in the area. We also are advocating for preservation of tax-exempt financing for municipal bonds, a financial mechanism that lowers borrowing costs for communities.

Our residents deserve and expect that we continuously strive to stretch scarce taxpayer dollars while providing top-notch service. The Evansville Common Council has voiced its intention to engage in collaborative efforts and communications on behalf of our community. We are focused on success.

Community Announcements

The Eastern Star's Annual Strawberry Festival will be held from 3-7 p.m. on Friday, June 21, at the Masonic Temple, 104 West Main Street.

A ribbon-cutting for the Evansville Farmers Market will be held this Saturday, June 22, at 10 a.m. at Creekside Place, 102 Maple Street. Support buying fresh and local! Tender radishes, snap peas, and yummy strawberries were available last week.

Artists are painting "en plein air" throughout the area this week. Mark your calendar for the second annual Theodore Robinson Plein Air Painting Competition art sale and awards presentation on Sunday, June 23, at the Masonic Temple, 104 West Main Street, beginning at 1:00 p.m.

The 17th Annual Ice Cream Social benefitting Eager Free Public Library will be held on Friday, June 28, from 6-8 p.m. on the Library lawn, 39 West Main Street. An auction and raffle will be held. Raffle tickets are currently available at the Library and Kopecky's Piggly Wiggly.

Evansville loves its wonderful 4th of July celebration! It takes dozens and dozens of volunteers to make it a success. I have committed to a shift as a ticket seller for ECP, two hours of help at the I&E Club's Lunker Lob, and time in the Evansville Youth Center's concession stand. If you can volunteer a couple of hours, please contact Jim at ecpi@litewire.net. It is a great way to meet old and new friends and neighbors.

Community Congratulations/Thanks

Our community congratulates the 2013 graduates of Evansville High School. We wish you success and happiness as you explore your place in a changing world!

Evansville congratulates and thanks Chris Eager for his decades of service to the Evansville community. Chris served as Evansville mayor from 1988-1992, president of Union Bank & Trust Company, and president of Creekside Place. We offer him best wishes in his retirement and his move to California.

