State of the City 2020

The City of Montague continues to make significant progress and accomplish major projects even when things out of our control take place. One of those major interruptions this past year was the causeway flooding between Montague and Whitehall. Through the coordinated efforts of the City, Muskegon County Road Commission, and MDOT implemented a temporary solution to the problem and continues to discuss a long-term solution for the problem. Water levels are cyclical and after this one or two-year peak the water levels again subside. However, new data shows that the average water levels will remain higher than historic norms, and either the duration between peaks will be more frequent and/or the peak water elevation will continue to increase. Add into this scenario the fact that development and impervious surfaces are increasing within the White River watershed, storm events are becoming more frequent and severe, which is adding more water to the system. Overall, water levels like we've seen this year are likely to return, so a permanent fix for the causeway is needed. Initial discussions regarding that fix indicate that there is no easy solution because simply raising the road will cause other hydrological changes which would need to be addressed. Regardless of the what has happened and what will happen in the future, I am extremely proud of all the hard work and perseverance that the City's Department of Public Works has shown in going the extra mile to keep the causeway open.

During the past year the City has been preparing implementation of the State’s new Lead and Copper Rule (LCR) to ensure the safety of our public water supply. Part of that process includes compiling an inventory to evaluate possible service lines that meet the State’s criteria for replacement. To facilitate this effort and meet the additional City objective of evaluating sewer cross-connections the City engaged a consulting firm to complete the associated work over the next five years. 2019 was the first year which focused on the northeast portion of the City and staff is evaluating that data to determine the work that will need to be completed in the coming years. Lastly the City needed to ensure that there were sufficient funds available to implement the work which is required by the State. With no available funding from the State, the City undertook an independent water rate study to ensure the Water Fund had the necessary financial resources. With approximately 30% of the water service lines needing upgrades and/or replacement, the City expects to fund and spend approximately $1.4 million to implement the State LCR over the next several years.

This past year the City sent well wishes to a long-term Public Works employee, Kyle Jelinek, when he left to dedicate more time to a family business, Jelinek Tree Service. Kyle's dedication and work ethic will certainly benefit the business. To replace Kyle the City welcomed Kelly Coon who has become an integral member of City's ongoing work. And lastly, the City says farewell to the City's Clerk, Michelle Landis, as she returns to the full-time practice of law with a firm in Grand Rapids. The skills and talents which Michelle brought to the job will be missed. 2019 also saw new campground managers at Trailway Campground. Joanne and Rich Martin helped Montague throughout the season and will be joining us again in 2020 when the weather gets a little warmer. We look forward to their return.

2019 was also a year of planning for the future. One of the largest of those efforts was the continued work by the Muskegon County Drain Commissioner to initiate the Montague Drain project. The drain covers an area of land just northeast of the intersection of Eilers Road and Cook Street/Ochs Road to the outlet on the
White River, near Dog-n-Suds. The waterway of the drain is also known as Buttermilk Creek and is an essential part of the system as it collects all the rainwater and snowfall falling on the land. Unfortunately, the current condition has allowed storms to erode the Creek’s banks and destroys natural vegetation along the Creek, moves sediment in the Creek causing shallower and wider streambeds, and damages residents’ property along the Creek. The Montague Drain system needs attention and improvements to ensure the natural flow of water to restore the Creek and protect it from further damage. Currently the Drain Commissioner is coordinating with property owners who live along the Creek to obtain easements with the hope of beginning actual restoration work in 2020.

The City in coordination with the Downtown Development Authority pushed several projects forward this past year, most notably the installation of the skating rink behind the post office, painting of the mural on the side of the Groove Record Store, and development of the Artisan Market Village. The skating rink is just the first phase of a multi-year project that will continue to evolve over the next few years. The Artisan Market Village is also a multi-year project and the area will continue to add amenities, landscaping, and artwork over the next year. Once this initial phase is complete and all the cottages are leased then the City will continue toward adding additional walking paths and cottages. The Village has already become a gathering place for the community with cottages participating in Pumpkinsfest and hosting the first ever Montague Tree Lighting Ceremony.

Progress continues to be made throughout the City both big and small. Major projects this past year focused on the reconstruction of Mohawk Court and installation of the Cook Street sidewalk (from Hancock to the bike trail). The City continues to prioritize road and sidewalk projects for 2020 and just recently initiated a partnership project with several local students to survey our existing sidewalk infrastructure. Some of the smaller activities this year included installing a hearing assistance system in the Council Chambers, replacing the windows in the library, repairing the roof and portions of the ceiling at the Montague Museum, and facilitating installation of the Storyville exhibit in the library.

Similar to past several years the City continued work to update its ordinances and policies. The City implemented the new Marihuana Ordinance under the provisions of the new Michigan Regulations and Taxation of Marihuana Act (a.k.a., Michigan’s Recreational Marihuana Law). The City’s ordinance, besides implementing regulations on general use and possession, establishes a moratorium on establishments within the City. The City continues to review whether certain establishments would be allowed in specified areas, and under particular conditions, within the City. Another major change was an update to the City’s Offenses and Miscellaneous Provisions Ordinance, which decriminalizes many minor infractions making them civil infractions instead of criminal misdemeanors. The City’s Animal Ordinance, and more specifically the deer hunting section of the ordinance, continues to be implemented by our staff. During the 2018/2019 season the City approved hunters removed 46 deer from the population – 43 does and 3 bucks. With changed deer movement habits and lower population numbers the current season has had less hunter participation. As of this writing, only 8 does have been harvested.

This past year the City was able to the lower the millage rate for the first time in nearly decade. Although not a dramatic decrease (-0.25 mills), the change shows the dedication and impact staff are having on finding operational efficiencies and appropriate planning. The City will continue to review the millage rate annually in hopes of providing additional tax relief for our residents, even if it occurs in small increments over time. Some of that planning at the staff and Council level includes discussions with the City of Whitehall on shared services, including a possible combined waste / recycling hauler, senior services through White Lake Area Community Education, and addressing the higher water levels.

Lastly, as I reflect on last year I remembered that early 2019 brought us a cold weather spell and a three day power outage. Because of this I realized there is a lot we do for each other already in this community, but also a lot more we could be doing especially during these “emergencies”. This next year staff and council will discuss how to be better prepared and how best to serve the community. This may be simply providing
more information about available resources or coordinating efforts with local organizations. As a community we should all be checking on our neighbors or helping out when and where we can. If you or an organization you know provides services to our City residents, such as warming stations / emergency shelter locations or food distribution, please let us know so we can help share the information to help out our neighbors.

Tom Lohman
Mayor
City of Montague