

# Jefferson County Commissioner Update



By Mark Schoenrock, Chairman, Jefferson County Board of Commissioners

As we enter Fall 2023, your Jefferson County Board of Commissioners is very engaged in serving the citizens of Jefferson County. Our constant goal is to provide top quality service to our citizens in a fiscally prudent manner. We welcome and encourage our citizens to attend the meetings of the board. We meet every Tuesday at 9 a.m. in the courthouse except for the fifth Tuesday. The meetings are also available on zoom if you cannot attend, and we encourage you to contact us on issues that are important to you.

Jefferson county board members serve in leadership capacities on the following state and regional boards which provide numerous essential services to Jefferson County citizens: Nebraska Association of County Officials, Southeast Nebraska Development District, Region V Services and Systems, Blue Rivers Area Agency on Aging, Public Health Solutions district health board, Blue Valley Community Action, and the LB 840 committee.

Our central objective as county commissioners is to ensure the coordination and delivery of essential quality governmental services to the citizens of Jefferson County in a fiscally responsible and efficient manner. With every decision that we make, we recognize and appreciate the hard work and dedication that it takes to provide the taxpayer provided revenue for county services for we are also taxpayers. We work hard to ensure that these resources are utilized in a prudent and responsible manner to provide the products and services required to make Jefferson County an attractive and satisfying place to live and work.

After numerous meetings reviewing the budget and conducting the final budget hearing, we recently approved the county budget for fiscal year 2023-2024. In spite of significantly increased costs for equipment, parts, supplies, services, insurance and personnel, we lowered the county levy 5.2% while the county valuation increased 9.29% and approved a budget with a 3.3% increase. The county tax request including county operations, PWF highway bond and ambulance is \$7,893,046, compared to \$7,640,157 last year. Our goal is that this budget will maintain the same high level of service across all of the county operating domains to best support our citizens.

We are very engaged with the Nebraska Legislature and Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen regarding legislation that affects county government operations and our citizens. We have had numerous communications with many members of the Legislature and Governor Pillen with many more to come.

Road and bridge maintenance and improvements, citizen safety and law enforcement, and 24/7 advanced life support ambulance operations will always be our highest priorities. The county road and bridge system is the lifeline of our county and we work hard to maintain and improve it. The county one- and six-year road plan is at the heart of this effort. We review and approve the six year plan in the late winter-early spring timeframe every year. Every Jefferson County citizen

must feel safe, and we work hard to ensure we have a first-class law enforcement department led by our Sheriff. We recently held an ambulance forum where we received much excellent input from the community as to the importance of our ambulance department. The majority of the county's budget is allocated to these three areas. Additionally, we have been successful in obtaining grants and state programs to help us do even more in these areas, reducing the use of Jefferson County tax money.

Jefferson County was successful this year in obtaining two more bridges to be funded under the Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) bridge match program. In addition the Steele City bridge will be replaced and funded by NDOT. Additionally, we are working with TC Energy to replace the Steele City road as their heavy truck traffic significantly damaged the road during the pipeline cleanup effort. We are grateful for the hard work of our highway department to make these significant infrastructure advancements a reality. We ensure we keep our highway, law enforcement and ambulance vehicles, radios, personal gear and all of our equipment and supplies continually upgraded and maintained, as well as recruiting, training and retaining a quality workforce. These are all necessary elements to achieve the objective of providing top quality service to our citizens.

We are currently pursuing congressional funding opportunities to fund the PWF road completion. We requested \$10.2 million which is 80% of the cost estimate and were informed by Congressman Smith and Senator Fischer that \$8.5M has been approved by the United States House of Representatives Appropriations Committee. That now must clear the congressional conference process and final votes by the House and Senate and signature by the President. We hope to hear of final approval before the end of the year. We will continue every effort to get this PWF road construction funded as this is a vital project for Jefferson County and for our region.

We were recently notified that Cedar Valley Paving LLC is planning to begin construction on the \$3.83M Endicott Clay Road project in the spring. This is a team effort between Jefferson County and Endicott Clay Products, with significant grant support from NDOT, Community Development Block Grant, and the United States Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration. We have worked hard to obtain these grants and coordinate this support and

are excited to see this vital project getting ready to break ground. This is a significant economic development multiplier for Jefferson County.

Region V Systems and the Wellbeing Initiative are actively competing for a grant to provide funding for a Recovery & Wellness Engagement & Outreach Center in Lincoln and community resource centers in four counties in southeast Nebraska which will provide peer support services. Due to the hard work of Jefferson County Diversion Director Peggy Galloway, Jefferson County is a candidate for one of the community resource centers. The intent of these centers is to provide low barrier engagement and access to services for individuals seeking recovery support. The objective is to help these individuals become sustaining contributors to society, and reducing county tax dollars for law enforcement, jail, court, legal and other expenses.

Public Health Solutions and Blue Valley Community Action recently hosted the district Community Health Summit in Geneva. Jefferson County had numerous representatives in attendance. The top priorities identified by the summit were mental health and access to care for our citizens. We will remain very engaged in these continuing efforts.

We continue to work hard to develop the best plan to expand broadband access in our county. We are very happy to report that the Nebraska Public Service Commission approved our joint public private partnership application with Diode to bring high speed internet to over 100 additional Jefferson County homes. Construction is currently on going on this project. This will be the first step of a multi-step process to reach even more homes. We are currently pursuing further opportunities to bring high speed internet to even more Jefferson County homes. Our goal is to get the most fiber optic cable and high speed internet to as many homes as possible, maximizing the use of available resources. Broadband access is a huge economic, service and social game changer.

We are leading efforts to consistently review and improve cybersecurity. Every week, there is some county in the United States that is taken down by cyber thieves. As all county operations

are very dependent on computer systems, we are diligently working to do our best to keep all our systems operational 24/7.

In this challenging job market, county workforce recruitment, training and retention is a vital priority. The county board is constantly reviewing this to ensure that Jefferson County remains competitive in a very challenging time. Like all businesses, we need quality people to deliver quality services to our citizens.

Support to our veterans is always a top priority. We have made many advancements in this area, led by our Veterans Service Office. It is our privilege to honor the Jefferson County veteran of the month on the first Tuesday of every month.

We are working with the Southeast Nebraska Development District and Nebraska government to address the workforce housing and childcare shortage. We are very aware of this critical need in our county and are working hard to address it.

We will provide more updates on these and other issues in future discussions. We hope that this periodic column is successful in promoting an increased dialogue and facilitates further communication with each of you reading it. We look forward to working together here in Jefferson County to make our home an even better place to work and live. As always, we welcome your input so we know how best to serve each of you!