

Jefferson County Commissioner Update



By Mark Schoenrock, Chairman, Jefferson County Board of Commissioners

As we enter summer 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, LB 840 committee and Five Rivers Resource, Conservation and Development.

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 manner. With every decision that we make, we recognize and appreciate the hard work and dedication that it takes to provide the taxpayer provided fiscal resources of our county, for we are also taxpayers. We work hard to ensure that those 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.

We are very active with the Nebraska Legislature regarding legislation that affects county government operations. We have had numerous communications with many members of the Legislature with many more to come.

Jefferson County just experienced its worst fire in memory. The Rock Creek fire burned over 2,000 acres and threatened many of our citizens' homes, structures and livestock. We are so grateful for the many fire departments, some from very far away, and others who came to help us in our time of need, and for the Jefferson County fire departments, first responders and dispatch who so ably serve our citizens 24/7/365. We are so grateful for the many businesses and other citizens who made donations or otherwise contributed to the effort. We addressed the assembled force during the fire to express our gratitude to each and every one and knew at that moment that we were in the company of true American heroes. Due to their heroic efforts, no Jefferson County homes were lost and damage was greatly minimized.

Road and bridge maintenance and improvements, and citizen safety and law enforcement 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 encourage citizen input to this plan as it sets the priorities for our road

and bridge plan for the next year, and the next six years. We recently reviewed and approved the 2023-2029 plan earlier this spring. 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. The majority of the county's budget is allocated to these two 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 has 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 and law enforcement vehicles, radios, personal gear and all of our equipment 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 were informed by the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) after Christmas that we were not successful in our 2022 application for the Rural Surface Transportation Grant to complete the PWF road. There were only 12 projects funded across the entire nation. We received a USDOT debrief and intend to compete again this year for the grant. We obtained letters of support from former Governor Ricketts, the executive NDOT leadership, and Senator Fischer, former Senator Sasse, and Congressman Smith. We appreciate the numerous letters of local support from our citizens. We are currently pursuing congressional funding opportunities and plan to review the 2023 USDOT notice of funding opportunities. 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 are excited to report that Cedar Valley Paving LLC will soon begin construction on the \$3.83M Endicott Clay Road project. 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.

The Jefferson County school attendance and diversion and support programs continue to be very successful in helping our rising generation get on the right path towards becoming productive members of society. Peggy Galloway and Heather Watson are champions in this effort. School truancy often leads to other behaviors that are detractors from society and lead to significant societal costs. These costs are measured in terms of increased law enforcement costs, increased court and legal costs, increased family support costs, increased health care system costs, and less probability of having a job or profession that contributes to society, to name just a few. Our goal is to intervene early so that we do all we can to get that young person on a better path that leads to desirable outcomes rather than undesirable outcomes which have the probability of affecting them and society the rest of their lives.

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 starting on this project. This will be the first step of a multi-step process to reach even more homes. We are currently exploring the next steps 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.

The county vastly improved communication system has now been operational for over six months and is functioning well. There are many moving parts to this which will vastly improve our communication abilities and service to our citizens.

Our redesigned website to increase citizen access to government services has proven to be very popular. We have received many favorable reviews from our citizens. The website address is jeffersoncounty.nebraska.gov.

In this challenging time, 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 job market. Like all businesses, we need quality people to deliver quality services to our citizens.

We will soon begin the budget process for the 2023-2024 budget year. This will be a particularly challenging budget with the costs of equipment, parts, supplies, fuel and personnel all substantially rising. We welcome and encourage citizen input into that process.

After a year-long process of numerous hearings with our planning and zoning committee, and with the county board of commissioners, we recently approved new zoning standards for commercial wind energy conversion systems, based on recommendations forwarded to the board by the planning and zoning committee. Hundreds of you our fellow citizens voiced your opinions in this process. It is our sworn duty as your elected servants to ensure that the voice of our citizens is heard and that the approved standards reflect our citizens' will and protect their health, safety and welfare. We believe the process we have been through and the approved standards accomplished those objectives.

Support to our veterans is always a top priority. We have made many advancements in this area, led by our Veterans Service Officer Don Cook. 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 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!