

Jefferson County Commissioner Update



By Mark Schoenrock, Chairman, Jefferson County Board of Commissioners

On this Memorial Day weekend as we enter summer 2022, let us pause to remember those who have gone before us that gave all that mortality can give that we enjoy our lives today in freedom and abundance. A terrible price in blood has been paid to secure our way of life for us and for future generations. The words of President Franklin Roosevelt are as true today as they were on the eve of World War Two: "Freedom cannot be bestowed, it must be achieved." Until the day when the world is free from tyranny, our freedom will be preserved only if Americans

step forward to answer the call—and prove ourselves worthy to be free. The brave souls we remember this weekend have eternally proven their worth, and in so doing, are exemplars of our nation's highest principles. They have earned the eternal thanks of a grateful nation.

The Jefferson County board of commissioners welcomes and encourages you 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. We will be providing periodic updates like this in the local media with the intent being to provide you, the citizens of Jefferson County, with the issues that the county faces, the work that we do to address them, and the rationale for the decisions that we are called upon to make. In the minutes and press accounts of our meetings, you will read about the work the board is doing, but due to various limitations, you do not always get the background on the issue and the rationale that we use to make our decisions. With these periodic updates, we hope to accomplish that objective. Your board will always be striving to emphasize service, leadership and teamwork.

Each of us realizes at the core that we are servants of the citizens of Jefferson County. Our constant goal must be to ensure that we are good listeners, that we are involved in our communities, constantly reaching out, and that we understand the issues that are important to you, our fellow citizens. Having that understanding then helps us make the best decisions that must be made. Although we live in a rural area, we live in a very inter-connected world and the challenges of the 21st century are at our doorstep. We are privileged to live in this beautiful area of southeast Nebraska, but we are not immune from many of the world's challenges and we must work hard to accordingly address them. We are proud to call Jefferson County home.

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 reviewed and approved the 2022-2028 plan earlier this 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. 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. 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.

Recently, your board approved retaining High Street Consulting, a firm led by former Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) Director Kyle Schneweis, to coordinate the preparation of the Jefferson County application for the Rural Surface Transportation Grant administered by the United States Department of Transportation to complete the PWF road. In early February, I led a delegation to Lincoln to present the importance of completing the PWF road to the executive NDOT leadership. We were successful in obtaining their support, as well as Senator Fischer, Senator Sasse, Congressman Smith and Governor Ricketts. We appreciate the numerous letters of local support from our citizens. We should learn the results in late summer/early fall.

Additionally, we are excited to report that we are on schedule to let bids this summer to complete the Endicott Clay road project. This is a team effort between Jefferson County, NDOT, the United States Department of Commerce and Endicott Clay products. We have worked hard to coordinate this support and are excited to see this vital project getting ready to break ground.

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 are currently working hard to develop the best plan to expand broadband access in our county. Our goal is to get the most fiber optic cable 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. We are diligently working to do our best that this does not happen here.

The county vastly improved communication system is almost operational. There are many moving parts to this which will vastly improve our communication abilities. Our revamped website to increase citizen access to government services has proven to be very popular. We have received many favorable reviews from our citizens. In this challenging time, workforce recruitment, training and retention is a vital priority.

In March, we extended the moratorium until April 1, 2023 on commercial wind energy conversion systems. We had contact with hundreds of you our fellow citizens and the consistent message was that our citizens felt that their voices had not been heard in this process. We now have extended the process for planning and zoning coordination to give our citizens that opportunity.

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 to address workforce housing needs, historical society support, coordination with village, city, county, state and federal officials, coordination with the many organizational boards that serve Jefferson County, and many other challenges that affect our lives here.

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 and Blue Valley Community Action.

We plan to resume coordination this summer with our State Senator Tom Brandt to further our efforts to eradicate the scourge of methamphetamine from our county. The bill that Senator Brandt introduced in the last session that we coordinated with him and that we testified for, did not get out of the Health and Human Services committee, so we will re-group and draft a new bill that we hope to get introduced in January in the next Nebraska Legislature.

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. The county budget hearings will be in the late July- early September timeframe. This will be an especially difficult budget process this year with the cost of equipment, parts, supplies, fuel and labor rising dramatically. It will be vitally important to have citizen input this year.

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!