

# Jefferson County Commissioner Update



By Mark Schoenrock, Chairman, Jefferson County Board of Commissioners

On Tuesday January 11, I assumed the duties of Jefferson County Board of Commissioners chairman from my predecessor Commissioner Michael Dux. As we start a new year, I would like to say a sincere thank you to Michael for his past service on the Jefferson County board. I am looking forward to serving Jefferson County with my fellow commissioners Gale Pohlmann and Michael Dux addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

We welcome and encourage 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 what 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.

As our board begins a new year of service, we will be emphasizing 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. Our next annual hearing on this plan will be on January 25th. 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.

One of the significant challenges our county faces is school attendance which can lead to involvement in the juvenile justice system. When I first became a commissioner, I noticed a

troubling trend of young people who were absent from school getting in trouble, which leads to significant costs borne by Jefferson County taxpayers. As a board we implemented a diversion and school attendance program to address this. We have been working hard to coordinate with all elements of the school system and various community support elements to address this challenge. As with any challenge, there is no one size fits all solution to address the challenges that we face here in Jefferson County. Our goals are to increase school attendance, increase participation in extra-curricular activities, improve academic performance, and improve the chances of producing young people who will be contributors to society. We have learned with our efforts so far that 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.

The Jefferson Attendance Support program is dedicated to working with youth who are at risk of being suspended or are at risk for involvement in the Juvenile Justice System due to excessive absences. In Jefferson County, it has been shown that youth who are experiencing attendance concerns are facing barriers to school attendance that are complex and often as the result of outside pressures. Program staff focus on one-on-one interactions with the youth and his/her parents to gain a better understanding of the barriers to school attendance and ultimately what can be done to alleviate these barriers. As a result, a specialized plan is developed to address these barriers and to meet the needs of that specific youth and his/her family.

The presence of an Attendance Support Program in Jefferson County helps create awareness and education to parents regarding the importance of school. Furthermore, the program continues to focus on absenteeism at the elementary level to create positive attendance habits early on and ultimately higher graduation levels. We are also leading efforts to address broadband access, infrastructure improvement, cybersecurity, emergency preparedness, improved communication systems, totally

revamped website to increase citizen access to government services, ambulance coordination, workforce recruitment and retention, courthouse maintenance, planning and zoning coordination to address technological advancements, support to our veterans, workforce housing needs, biohazard decontamination, 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.

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. During my years of Army service, I had much experience with this important principle as I had to balance many budgets and allocate precious and scarce resources among varied and competing requirements. As my fellow commissioners Gale and Michael are long successful agri-businessmen, they understand this as well.

We will provide more updates on these and other issues in future discussions. We hope that this 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.