

## **2023 Year in Review**

### **What would you say is the greatest accomplishment of 2023 in Watseka and why?**

From my former College Basketball days and being goal oriented I think this is a multifaceted answer. Council had many goals that it wanted to accomplish as it does every year. Areas of improvement interests are: Recreation, Health and Safety, Economic Development/Business District and Infrastructure (which these will be named later.)

#### **Recreation:**

- Pickle ball courts were resurfaced at Peters Park
- Concrete Bags and Ladders Games were added to Lakeview Park
- The city was able to locate a Disc Golf Designer and the Legion graciously under took the project on their own that the city approached to help pay for the new course at Legion Park.
- Additional Parking was added at Peters Park.
- With Intergovernmental cooperation the city provided bleachers at the Park District Fields for High school and Park District fans to use during their season
- All three of the city's ponds were restocked with fish
- The city has supported the Watseka Family Fest with monetary, picnic tables, and labor for what has become an awesome and growing event for the city. Plus, it was a wonderful Christmas event they added.
- For 2024 more of the same the Council and Public Works Department's goal is to try and seek a grant for adding additional amenities to our parks. If you have ideas please share by contacting your alderman or calling City Hall.

## **Health and Safety:**

- Through the leadership at the fire department the city has obtained its own ambulance and has several trained staff to go on these calls. The city obtained its own ambulance when the Riverside Hospital had to reduce their service to the area due to staffing issues, just like the rest of the nation faces. Chief Baier and Assistant Chief Peters are working on another initiative that they will be presenting to council which could improve the safety for citizens in a big way.
- In addition, the department will be acquiring a new rescue/pumper truck in the next week that will have the combined capabilities so two pieces of equipment can be eliminated.
- Both of these vehicles were bought used with low mileage and a very good price.
- Not to exclude our Police Department and their efforts crime is still decreasing and our department under Chief Douglas's leadership is still striving for advanced and specialized training of its officers.
- Chief Douglas was able to secure a donation for Speed Detection Trailer that has been seen around town and through the data is showing that its presence is working.

## **Economic Development/Business District Improvement:**

- The city missed the \$3 + Million Street Scape Grant for Main Street by one point this past year. We have been told we should have a good chance for being awarded this upcoming grant period.
- A new business opening at the former KFC has recently been awarded a \$100,000 revolving loan grant which hopes to open February.
- The new Steak House is shooting for a March opening.
- So, including the two previously mentioned new businesses this would make 14 new businesses that have opened up in Watseka in the last 24 months

**The city has purchased property in town and has razed some buildings on those properties. What are the current plans?**

- You will note that the city has started to acquire vacant properties on Main Street and has started the process of making improvements
- Through some efforts of our Public Works Department they were able to clear the second-floor ceiling of the Opera House for structural engineers to finalize an in-depth Structural Engineering Report to determine if we can start rehabilitation efforts there. The Land Marks Illinois Representative and the Engineering Representative as well as many citizens have indicated if the building can be saved it should be. One stated vacant lots and parking lots are not Economic Development actions that are beneficial to growth of a downtown. From the report we will be able to assess and compare the costs to demolish or stabilize and seal up from the elements and deem which route is the best to go.
- Some of the vacant lots the city has acquired, plans are being developed for plaza/ seating areas and plaza /parking. Basic plans have been put into place, but we are still willing to take suggestions from citizens. If you have some ideas please contact your alderman or call City Hall.

**What criticism do you hear the most from residents and what would you like residents to know about these issues?**

- Taxes which is understandable as nobody likes taxes, but they are necessary to make needed improvements especially to infrastructure.
- • Presently, the city receives annual Motor Fuel Tax (MFT) revenues around \$250,000. The two blocks of mill and overlay completed last summer on Mulberry between 7th and 9th streets cost \$370,000. One can see that if the city wanted to do a decent size road project for example like South 3rd St. from Cherry to Jackson St (8 blocks) it might take 4 to 6 years to build up enough MFT funds to complete such a project, it has been guesstimated possibly in excess of \$1Million to do this type of job. Meanwhile our roads keep falling more into more disrepair. The council created the Telecommunication, Electric, and Gas taxes in order to

supplement the MFT funds so the city can do more road projects more frequently.

- Citizens want to see roads repaired which is what the Telecommunications, Electric, and Gas taxes are earmarked for infrastructure. These taxes are what provided the capabilities of 6 roads being done two summers ago along with many roads being cracked filled. The goal of the council is to create a road program that does some work each year. This funding will help accomplish this endeavor.
- Regarding special infrastructure taxes the council recently passed, some posts on social media need to be dispelled. I've learned especially the last three years that with Social Media you can say anything you want. Facts don't seem to get in anybody's way to put anything out there. Everybody can post their opinion, but that doesn't make it factual.

To see other county towns and towns comparable to Watseka that have an electric tax please view the following site

<https://www.ameren.com/-/media/rates/files/illinois/aie141otta.ashx>

for the telecommunication tax please go to

<https://tax.illinois.gov/localgovernments/disbursements/excise.html>.

Gilman has a gas tax similar to Watseka's gas tax and the rate is \$.05 cents a gallon not 5%.

In conclusion, the city of Watseka does not have a Natural Gas tax so these statements were inaccurately portrayed by the same person on their social media site.

- The Alcohol Tax was passed recently to keep funding to the Revolving Loan, Business Facade Grant, and a possible Business/Building Stabilization Grant. These are in place to entice new businesses to town. The Business/Building Stabilization Grant is something being worked on to help potential new and existing business owners help make non-façade related repairs to their buildings. This was thought of when two possible buildings downtown had sales dropped due to the roofs in a state of disrepair. The hope that if there are structural issues that these types of business have could get some

proportional help with completing repairs. Additional use for these funds would be to make improvement to city infrastructure in the downtown business district.

- The alcohol tax is split between contributing to the Police Pension as well as the Economic Development measures previously mentioned. In talking to the management at two of the larger sellers of alcohol as well as random customers primarily from Indiana buying 50-70 cases at a time the prices here are holding strong as well as these businesses alcohol sales.

**Raising Water and Sewer Rates has been an ongoing process in the past couple of years. What the money is being used for?**

**Ongoing and completed 2023 projects:**

- **Oxidation Ditch** completed 2-year \$600,000 project at the sewer plant.
- **Major 100 ' drainage project of 48" pipe that replace a vastly undersized system behind Kingdon's Apartments** which will help any flood runoff to recede quicker.
- **Storm Sewer separations and improvements** on Park Ave and by the West side Fire station.
- **GIS Digital Underground Pipe Mapping** for improved locating of underground sewer and water pipes.
- **SCADA Water and Sewer warning and protection improvements** gives staff warnings of water and sewer issues and in some cases the abilities to take corrective actions and adjustments via their cell phones while in transit to the plant.
- **Well #10 Rehabilitation** replacement of new high service pumps
- **1/3 (900) radio meter reading replacements** which will improve monthly reading and billings.
- **Fire Hydrants flushing, repairing, and painting** for enhanced fire protection.
- **West Side Water Tower chemical feed system enhancement** for better compliance.
- **North Street Water Main** 350 feet of 12-inch water main under Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR), 130 feet of 24-inch steel casing augured under

UPRR, replaces old and undersized 4-inch water main One of only four UPRR water main crossings in city.

- **Well #11** Located west of City Hall, 16-inch steel casing, 188-foot depth, 1,150 gallon per minute ultimate capacity
- **Lead Service Line Inventory** Grant from Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, \$40,000 grant so survey at no cost to City, mailings submitted to residents and businesses in December 2023.
- **Emergency Generator** Grant from the IL Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), \$65,000 grant for emergency generator and connections to three lift stations at no cost to City, DCEO approved grant in late 2023 allowing project to move forward in 2024
- **Employee continuing education and training**

### **What can local political leaders, business leaders and residents do to help economic development in the area?**

Help by sharing their vision with each other, remember to shop local, and support new and existing businesses in town. I think these groups should also support the county's efforts in job training and local high schools' efforts through IARDS to help in building non-college degreed workforce. I think Schools, Business Leaders, County, and City officials should have periodic meetings to discuss mentorships, internships, skillset needs, soft skill requirements, and job shadows.

### **What is the biggest challenge facing Watseka in 2024?**

- **Continued success with Economic Development** with the target opening dates for the former KFC in February and the Steakhouse in March along with two new businesses to be located in the former Charms building along with the pending sale of the Uarco building for new light manufacturing plant, Watseka has the potential for 17 new businesses that have either reopened or will be opened in the past 26 to 28 months. We still have work to do with some buildings downtown.
- **Keep having success bringing the right people together for existing business expansion** the city was able to bring the owners of DISS

(former Superior Cleaners) and the owners of RP Lumber together. The former Alexanders Lumber (Peoples) building was acquired by DISS for their expanding business.

- **Housing** The city in 2023 completed a Housing and Economic Development Study (at no charge to the city) and as a result of the study has brought some developer interest to the city in which there have been multiple meetings for various housing projects in the city. This could bring senior as well as Workforce Priced Housing to try and retain some of the residents that are going through the IDNR Flood Buyout program.
- **Collaboration/Networking** keep building relationships with school district, county government officials, state government officials, and federal government officials. Recently we have had talks with US Representative Robin Kelly's Office and we are looking at their potential mobile office that will locate in the city council chambers. This will aid citizens with federal issues and Veteran Aid issues. I think it is huge for a Democratic Representative to reach out to do something like this in a Republican County. As well as communicating and networking with other community leaders to bring improvements to Watseka that have been proven to be successful elsewhere. The don't reinvent the wheel approach.

### **What are other highlights for Watseka?**

- **Walnut Street to Tenth Street Roadway Resurfacing** 7,400 square yards of asphalt milling, 750 feet of curb and gutter removal and replacement, 1,550 tons of hot-mix asphalt, 900 square feet of sidewalk, 130 square yards of concrete driveway, project length 2,500 feet.
- **Mulberry Street from Seventh Street to Ninth Street** 4,350 square yards of asphalt milling, 200 feet of curb and gutter removal and replacement, 750 tons of hot-mix asphalt, 100 square feet of sidewalk, 150 square yards of concrete driveway, project length 1,300 feet
- **Martin Avenue** Final work on land acquisition with owners will be starting soon. Grant from US Department of Housing and Urban Development for \$2.35 million, extension of Martin Avenue from

Heritage Woods to Tenth Street, preliminary work underway with construction anticipated in 2024. This project will also include a major watermain loop to Grant Street. Besides opening this area up for future residential development, it will also help traffic congestion during school drop-off and pickup as well as EMS vehicle access to Heritage Woods and residents located behind the high school.

- **City helping other organizations** Though it was in a support status only I think Iroquois Memorial Hospital being awarded the Critical Care status is a highlight for the area. The close working relationship with our Fire Department's leadership and IMH leadership is going to continue to pay dividends for the citizens of Watseka.
- **Hopefully the creation of 4 new TIF DISTRICTS** Which give the city another tool to entice new businesses to town as well as residential developers to a potential site on the North Side out of the flood plain.
- **Finalization of the Historical District in the downtown area.** The redone map and application are with the state for anticipated approval. This status if a building owner chooses to go the historical route can lead to tax credits for improvements they may make.
- **Street Repair** The city is looking for additional ways to do more in house work to improve our roads with the purchase of a spray patch machine to repair bigger areas of road in the city. We are also looking at other processes to repair roads since the raw materials in making asphalt have spiked the last few years.
- **Opera House** The application for the building has been submitted for it to be placed on The Illinois Most Endangered Historical Building List which if past could put the building up for other funding grants.



- **Major grant updates received and applied for by the city.**
  - **Illinois Department of Natural Resources for Flood House Buyout  
\$ 5.3 Million (Awarded)**
  - **US Housing and Development Community Project Grant  
\$ 2.35 Million (Awarded)**
  - **Illinois Department of Transportation ITEP Street Scape  
\$ 3 Million (Missed 1 point this year but a good chance  
next grant period)**
  - **Federal Emergency Management Agency Bric Grant for Flooded  
property buyout and Demolition  
\$ 1.4 Million (Reopened and looking positive)**
  - **There have been many other smaller grants awarded to the city  
for various smaller infrastructure and administrative projects**