

Remarkable leaders, a remarkable community

Filled with anticipation for the new semester and re-energized after taking advantage of the privilege to rest and enjoy a long winter break, I find myself thinking about some of the people I admire and/or have gotten to know better this past year because of the pandemic. Here are just a few: our Hays city commissioners, our county health administrator and a group I refer to as our city rallying team.

Our city commissioners – Michael Berges, Sandy Jacobs, Ron Mellick, Shaun Musil and Mason Ruder – have always had important, and sometimes controversial, decisions to make, but who could have prepared for 2020? Just when the emotionally-charged debates over the roundabouts began to settle, along came the pandemic, and among the many critical decisions that had to be made was the mask ordinance.

Although I have attended city commission meetings in the past and interacted with commissioners at meetings and events, the pandemic provided me a different look at them as a leadership team. Here is what I learned. First and foremost, they are committed, hard-working people who have the courage to serve, listen and make tough decisions. Second, they are open-minded and willing to listen thoughtfully to a variety of perspectives. Several commissioners reached out to local and state leaders prior to the mask ordinance meeting to solicit different perspectives and to better understand emerging knowledge about the pandemic. Third, citizens were given the opportunity to speak at meetings and every voice was heard and respected. Fourth, when each commissioner voted, they stated their “whys.” The “whys” for each commissioner was different. Commissioners demonstrated the strength of their commitment to the people they serve by candidly disclosing their thoughts, each in their own style, with great passion. And finally, they did not vote the same. Watching our commissioners in action made me admire and respect them even more.

I have no evidence to back this up, but I believe among the most challenging jobs of 2020 was that of a county health administrator. I heard of several counties in Kansas that had difficulty hiring or keeping county health administrators during this pandemic. Hats off to Jason Kennedy, who continually showed up to meetings – night and day – presented data, developed protocols and kept our community informed. I imagine being in the public eye so much was indeed a big shift in his daily routine. Honestly, I did not know Jason until the pandemic (thrilled of course to learn he is a Fort Hays State grad), and I really valued his guidance as I made decisions for the university. I also think some of the hidden heroes of our times are the family members of those, like Jason, who serve the citizens of our community as public health administrators. I can only imagine the impact this pandemic had on the family life of these dedicated professionals.

My final shout out goes to the group I refer to as our city rallying team: Sara Bloom of the Downton Hays Development Corporation (DHDC), Melissa Dixon of the Hays Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) and Sarah Wasinger of The Chamber in Hays, Kansas. They all approach each day with a “can-do attitude,” high energy and a remarkable capacity to reinvent, re-imagine and find solutions to complex challenges. Their resiliency throughout the pandemic was remarkable. Whenever something fell apart, they simply found new ways to put it back together again.

The DHDC, for instance, created the “Stronger Than Ever” gift card program that generated almost \$50,000 in sales for 40 downtown businesses during the mandatory shutdown. Most of that money was raised in the first 48 hours of the campaign. Similarly, the Chamber sold \$92,000 in Chamber Cheques (which support local shopping) in 2020, a six-year high for the program. The DHDC also secured more than \$20,000 in donations in five weeks to turn the Downtown Pavilion into an ice-skating rink this winter so the community would have access to a fun and safe outdoor activity during the pandemic. I love how this community steps up. The generosity of the neighbors in our community never ceases to amaze me.

Creative efforts earned the DHDC two first-place Marketing Awards. March to Main went completely virtual but still highlighted the best parts of our community and engaged thousands of students. Dining with Downtown (a new event) created intimate dining experiences inside boutiques, art galleries, furniture stores and more, allowing participants to socially connect while physically distancing. It was so successful, DHDC plans to host two of these events in 2021.

One of the things I found beneficial as I navigated decisions for the university was meeting with my CEO colleagues who freely shared their thoughts, plans and lessons learned on their campuses and communities as they, like me, worked to create safe learning environments. While I engaged with my colleagues, our chamber provided similar opportunities for our community’s leaders and business professionals. Partnering with the FHSU Management Development Center, the chamber offered complimentary virtual lunch and learn sessions. In November, the Chamber acquired a Leadership Transformation Grant for 2021 from the Kansas Leadership Center, which provided 46 spots for participants to attend a workshop titled, “Your Leadership Edge, Lead for Change or Equip to Lead.”

Our Convention and Visitors Bureau has the unenviable task of creating new and compelling ways to bring visitors to our town. In a COVID-19 world, where travel, lodging, commerce and even basic human-to-human contact was so limited, how did the CVB respond to this unprecedented challenge? By adapting and reimagining their role. It pivoted to using the pandemic as an opportunity to focus on taking care of our community. In a normal year, the Welcome Center sells colorful Hays postcards to visitors in its welcome center. This year, the staff of the CVB printed positive messages on these cards and delivered several hundred of them to local assisted living facilities for their residents. They also partnered with FHSU’s College of Art and Design faculty to clean and restore 29 bronze markers on the Downtown Hays Historic Walking Tour. Now these markers are bright and readable. The CVB has plans to create a mobile version of the tour for visitors as well. Residents and visitors alike can also look forward to a CVB-designed driving tour of the iconic Pete Felten sculptures around Hays.

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