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Chalmers Flint reviews first year at Hoopeston's helm

When Chalmers Flint took office over a year ago, his goal was simple: bring new businesses to Hoopeston.

After 14 months, a tornado and the aftermath of Sept. 11, the reality of running a city has tempered, but not extinguished, that goal.

One of the first things Flint learned after taking office was that while new industry would be nice, fixing the budget was a bigger problem.

A \$400,000 deficit loomed. "There was nowhere you could make up the money," he said, "even using the reserves. The previous year, the city took \$60,000 or \$70,000 from the reserves. We just didn't have that kind of money."



FLINT

The shortfall almost cost the city even more, in terms of interest on the city's sewer bonds. Without a balanced budget, the bonds would have received a less-favorable rating, making bonds less attractive to borrowers and damaging the city's ability to get future bonds.

Balancing the need for city services with a balanced budget was no small feat. Flint, along with the city council, looked at income and expenses from every angle before deciding to increase taxes to fund the city.

Water and sewer rates, which had not been raised in 16 years, were planned first in an effort to repay \$1.2 million the fund owes the city's general

McDonald's marks anniversary

Don and Deanna Witzel are celebrating the third anniversary of owning the Hoopeston McDonald's and are giving area residents the gifts.

Each day this week has been noted with a special event, said manager Sara Rhodes. For example, free roses will be given to the first 100 customers Thursday and on Friday, the first 100 children at the store will receive free sports bottles. Saturday is a McDonald's/Coca-Cola Day at the Danville Dans game, where Ronald McDonald will make an appearance.

Residents are encouraged to sign up for a drawing to win one of several bicycles. Winners will be drawn Saturday at the Dans game.

Rhodes also announced the restaurant will now open at 5 a.m. Monday-Saturday and 5:30 a.m. Sundays.

Lorraine revamps ticket prices

The cost of most things keeps going up but a reserved seat at the Lorraine Theatre now costs less.

Owner Greg Boardman recently revamped prices, lowering reserved seats from \$8 to \$7 for evening shows and \$6 for matinees. The same prices apply to adult, non-reserved tickets.

Tickets for seniors, children and students are \$5 for all shows.

The change was based on suggestions from some customers, Boardman said, adding the new prices save theater-goers money and simplifies things for the staff.

In May, Boardman added computer equipment to allow patrons to order tickets online using a credit card, and reserve seats. Credit card orders have been

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fund.

See FLINT on other side

Flint continued from other side

Trash rates were also increased to keep pace with other communities and raise about \$100,000 of the deficit. A six percent telecommunications tax cut about \$60,000 from the shortfall and by making cuts in things like employee raises, a balanced budget was approved.

With finances under control, Flint can now turn his attention to other matters. One of the most pressing for him is renovating the northwest corner of Rtes. 1 and 9. “We’d like to do something with that corner that would be productive to the city of Hoopeston,” he said.

Flint’s ideal goal is to have a new motel, restaurant and strip mall on the site but in his time in office, he has met several brick walls for his efforts.

First, a former gas station on the corner may have contaminated the soil. The station, where Carnival Video was last located, closed in 1972 and in 1993, seven underground tanks were removed from the property. Whether the soil was contaminated is not known but officials plan to apply for a Brownfield grant which would pay for an environmental study of the property, Flint said.

Flint would like a chain motel at the corner but getting one will not be easy. Chains want to build a 45-unit motel as a minimum but some hotel officials Flint has talked to believe Hoopeston could support only 30 units, which they are not willing to build.

Empty factories are another priority. When Flint was elected, he expected Eagle Wings to move into the former Stokely building. That fell through. A bottled water company looked at the site but chose Paxton. An ethanol plant was proposed but the prospective buyer could not get financing for the project.

“Sometimes it seems like we haven’t done anything,” Flint said. “There are a lot of things we’ve worked on in the last 12 months. Have we accomplished a lot? No.”

Another project in the hopper is the tax increment financing (TIF) district. Formed nearly three years ago, the original district had problems, including not annexing some property and 44 pieces of property that were annexed - some as long ago as 1980 - but not on the tax roles because they were not filed with the county clerk. The city hired a Bloomington attorney to review

the TIF and make recommendations for changes that would fix the problems, Flint said.

The annexed but not properly taxed land is costing the city money. As taxes increase the amount between the base year the property was put in the TIF and subsequent increases is put in a fund which the city may use for TIF-related projects. When city coffers are getting the correct amount of money for the TIF, Flint hopes the council will consider using some of the money to purchase the land at the intersection of Rtes. 1 and 9. “If we could so something to get that corner started, I think most of the council would go for that,” he said.

Juggling all the facets of city government, Flint strikes a chord he first sounded during his campaign - the need for a city manager. “A city manager can get out and do what I’m trying to do, which is function as a flow-through, get out and get contacts,” he said. A friend who was a city manager in Storm Lake, Ia., got \$8 million in grants for the city, something Flint would like to see here if he had the time.

Flint said criticism that he is not a full-time mayor is unwarranted. “The paper might have said I’d be a full-time mayor but I never said it,” he said. “I never said I’d work all day, every day for \$300 a month. I said I quit my job (at the Hoopeston Multi Agency) to spend more time at this.”

Mayoral duties are sometimes frustrating. For example, the city worked on a drug testing policy, then learned it had to dovetail with a federal policy covering CDL drivers. “I’m used to being a principal and running my own building,” he said. “I can’t believe the hassle. There’ve been a couple times I thought about giving the keys back. Good thing I only planned on one term.” After that, “somebody’s going to have to step up to the plate.”

Despite setbacks, “it’s been a good experience,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot.

Weather



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