

Manchester Message column, February 2021

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A Change is about to happen . . .

In this first column of the New Year, I want to take a quick look back and say, “Aren’t we glad that year 2020 is behind us?” In spite of last year’s challenges, though, the City managed the difficulties well. We will begin this New Year with increased reserves in our operating fund and confidence that this year will look more normal than last year. That vision requires broad acceptance of the COVID vaccination and I believe that will happen.

As the City navigated last year, it learned things along the way. City staff consistently went the extra mile in responding to the COVID challenges, working to help businesses stay connected and informed and, to ensure City services were not diminished. All staff deserves our applause!

While we have much to appreciate, we need to acknowledge that we still lost much last year. Our lives were turned upside down and as a community we lost loved ones and we lost businesses. Last year was often painful and brought sadness.

One of the losses last year was the local branch of Commerce Bank. Fronting Manchester Road, its brick building has stood solid, impressive and accessible for many years. Over the years, many of us have banked there. No more! It closed. Out of that closure, though, a beneficial change is about to happen.

The City has plans to repurpose that building. What is its new purpose?

A new Manchester City Hall

Background

In August, last year, the Manchester branch of Commerce Bank formally closed. Almost immediately, the City Administrator and I started discussing that building as a possible site for City Hall.

Why does the City need a new City Hall?

The Lyceum, a beautiful building built in 1894, has served as City Hall since 1979. We are proud of its stature and significance! But, it no longer is an adequate facility for, nor does it support, a modern, efficient environment for managing a City of 18,000 residents. It’s not ADA-accessible to its second floor. Its windows are 120+ years old. Its internal spaces are all utilized with offices and

tiny cubicles that inhibit communication. Wiring for modern technology always poses problems. The entry foyer where business owners and residents come to do business is tiny and not welcoming. Costs to repair this historically recognized building always exceed budgeted amounts. The list of its weaknesses could go longer.

The City saw an opportunity and responded.

The asking price of \$1.7 million for the Commerce Bank Building seemed like a fair price for an acre and a half property that fronts Manchester Road and Creve Coeur Ave. The City moved to purchase it. Manchester's purchase price was below the asking price.

Before making a bid on the bank building, the City brought in an architect to examine it and develop some simple layouts ensuring that the space could be remodeled to fit City Hall staff needs. As important as determining whether the Commerce space could successfully be utilized, we asked the architect whether the costs for an upgraded "used" space made economic sense.

The architect's estimated costs for retrofitting the bank building as an alternative to building a new City Hall showed a savings for the City of about \$500,000. The cost of purchasing a new parcel of land is not even figured into those savings. Adding the purchase of a new 1.5 or 2 acre land parcel would drive "new costs" even higher. Overall savings to remodel, rather than build new, is probably closer to \$1.5M.

The purchase of the Commerce Bank Building made financial sense to the Board of Aldermen, City staff and me. The City has signed the agreement authorizing the purchase of the *former* Commerce Bank Building.

What are the plans for the Lyceum?

There are no plans at this early stage. The City has not done a lot of thinking around its use, once it's empty. The City wishes to preserve and maintain the Lyceum. There will be costs associated with its upkeep. We are aware of them.

The Lyceum stands next to the old spring. With its cold, fresh water, the spring attracted the first visitors to stop and spend time in a sparsely-settled village of a few local homes and businesses. The Lyceum today still connects us to the early community of strong and visionary families, farmers and business people. It holds value and historic uniqueness as a symbol of a vivid past. Perhaps, like the bank building, the Lyceum, can one day be repurposed for another community need, either at its current location or a new site within our City.

What's ahead?

Over the next several months, the City will be doing its due diligence study of the property. If all checks out, “closing” will occur in mid-spring. After final closing, City plans will include architectural and engineering plans for the new space. Perhaps, by summer the remodeling and conversion of the Commerce Building will start. That’s as far as City planning has gone. We promise to keep everyone informed.

Keep in mind the vision and strength of those early families. As farmers and merchants, they struggled and made decisions that built the community we are today. We share that unique and proud past and we claim a similar DNA.

Change has to happen. Welcome to the New Year! I look forward to it. We all should look forward to it!