

From the Mayor...

July 6, 2018

I'm sure you have noticed the North Buffalo Street project construction ramping up this summer. Sanitary sewer, storm water drains, gas lines, and electric service are all being reconstructed or relocated to accommodate construction of the new townhouses, city homes, and mews slated to begin this fall. In addition, a new lift station is under construction to address long-standing critical repairs in the neighborhood.

As infrastructure work is completed, new street and curb construction, designed to connect Indiana Street with Buffalo Street, will occur.

When the City work is complete, Mathews LLC will commence construction of new town homes and mews on the west side of the street. The first residence will be ready for occupancy in 2019.

Redevelopment projects like these are all very unique, include multiple partners, and dictate a very detailed, comprehensive process. Similar projects, funded by the State of Indiana Regional Cities initiative, are occurring all over northern Indiana. Let's take a closer look at the evolution of this project.

In 2002, under the guidance of former Mayor Ernie Wiggins, a large group of residents, downtown merchants, local leaders, and other stakeholders were convened by a National League of Cities consultant to locally evaluate the national trend of declining downtowns. Shifting retail patterns to big box and department stores were one significant cause of this decline. What could we do locally to prevent that from occurring in Warsaw?

What resulted was the WARSAW DOWNTOWN ACTION AGENDA 2002. Recommendations designed to improve downtown vitality were laid out as the result of public input sessions that stretched over several months with this group of local stakeholders. These included keeping City Hall downtown, improving parking for customers and employees of downtown businesses, establishing a facade grant fund to incentivize exterior storefront improvements, streetscape improvements to provide shade and esthetic appeal, promoting outdoor public arts, and creating outdoor dining opportunities among others. Past and current administrations have worked hard to institute this action plan to strengthen our downtown for our residents, merchants, and employers.

One significant strategy from the ACTION AGENDA was to "physically and economically connect our downtown to Center Lake" by converting Buffalo Street between Fort Wayne Street and Center Lake into a pedestrian link.

In 2009, a boulevard concept that addressed that link to the downtown was drawn that included commercial shops and a new city hall on the water company property.

The city's acquisition of the abandoned Indiana American Water pump station around 2010 stimulated discussion about the use of that property as a key component of that strategy.

Knowing that the area was in need of critical infrastructure repair and the community's desire was to redevelop the area, the City began purchasing residential property on Buffalo Street as early as 2004 and subsequently as it became available.

In 2013, led by Ball State University School of Architecture and Planning faculty and students, over 200 community members participated in a week long "Imagine Warsaw" community visioning workshop. North Buffalo Street was a popular topic amongst the public and the project report detailed a multitude of ideas and drawings, generated by the public, to develop the space. Those results will soon be posted to our city website.

In 2015, the City took advantage of an opportunity in legacy TIF district legislation to fund infrastructure for the project.

In 2016, the City, along with the developer presented the project to the Northeast Indiana Redevelopment Authority and was awarded three and a half million dollars of Regional Cities money. The project was a compilation of elements from all of the planning meetings. The Parks and Recreation Board has also been involved in the early review of the project. Competing against similar projects in the region, the North Buffalo Street project was funded in the full amount requested, based on the quality and readiness of the project.

It is quite apparent that the guidance from the 2002 Downtown Action Agenda, significant public input, and the Regional Cities-inspired funding opportunity has resulted in a well thought out project with significantly leveraged local funds that will revitalize a neighborhood and benefit taxpayers for many years to come.

The North Buffalo Street Project will have a transformative impact on the residential and commercial vibrancy of our downtown.