

Mayor's Report

October 9, 2023, General Meeting
(Drafted for packet deadline 10-4-23)

It's October, the end of one council year and the start of a new one. This last month has seen the administration focused on routine functions and training/networking opportunities more than on completing infrastructure improvement projects. City Administrator Kathy Leary has participated in Alaska Municipal League and Southeast Conference meetings in Anchorage and Sitka to build our opportunities for grant funding of our priority infrastructure projects and to keep Gustavus at the table regarding regional issues of concern such as Ferry service. Treasurer Ben Sadler attended a two-day AML meeting in Anchorage focusing on municipal taxation, building his knowledge in that area critical to funding our city fairly and effectively over the long term. And Fire Chief Sol Martinez attended the annual State Fire Conference, with vital sessions on subjects key to building our response readiness and capability. I very much appreciate the willingness of our key staff members to travel to meetings such as these to represent our City, to build vital connections with people in organizations we deal with, and to gain knowledge and skills that help us mature as a municipal government.

Staff changes always mean some temporary stress to our thinly-staffed organization; they are inevitable but also offer opportunities for fresh ideas and leadership. We support the need for our employees to take advantage of new opportunities, even when that means losing them from City service. We hope their time with the city has helped them build skills and experience that enables personal and professional growth. We are proud to have had them as colleagues during their time with the City of Gustavus.

We have been fortunate to fill the positions opened this year with very capable and motivated new employees. Ian Barrier stepped into very big shoes taking over for retiring Paul Berry at the DRC. Customer service there hasn't missed a beat. Larry Platt cruised into the Marine Facilities Coordinator role ready to apply his wealth of experience in the marine environment. Melisa Gomb stepped up to the Administrative Library Director position bringing broad library experience to our prized Public Library. Liesl Barker joined us as City Clerk, also bringing valuable administrative and customer-service experience. With the help of outgoing clerk Karen Platt and council member Shelley Owens, she got us ready for a successful election this week. And, this week Leah Okin has accepted the temporary position of EMS Coordinator for the Gustavus Volunteer Fire Department. She is an experienced EMS responder and will be key to building the response-readiness and skills of our dedicated EMTs. Thank you all!

This year saw many completed infrastructure improvement projects that assure better service to our public and make life easier. I'm particularly pleased to see:

- The hardened access trail and campfire improvements at the Beach Park;
The newly upgraded and relocated "Welcome to Gustavus" Kiosk that greets and informs visitors arriving on the ferry;
- Multiple road improvements for function, appearance, and snowplowing capability;
- Progress to renovate the old Post Office/Preschool building to productive service as a bike shop;
- The library bike shelter open and in use;
- The new septage storage facility by the DRC, which has enabled the pumping of dozens of septic tanks, much to customer relief;
- A new, taller radio tower broadcasting now from the Fire Hall,

- Installation of a heat pump system for City Hall;
- A new power line across the Salmon River Park to City Hall.
- City facilities dressed up with flowers planted at the park and library and in hanging baskets and
- Softball players enjoying a sunny summer season enabled by the new City permit from DOT&PF.
- City potable water supplies continue to test safe from PFAS contamination.

Routine city services run quietly in the background: The library excites readers with fine programs and collection additions; the DRC keeps our waste stream flowing contributing to a clean and health community; the roads are kept graded, the brushy edges cleared, and the snow removed despite real weather challenges; dedicated Fire Department volunteers are quick to respond when emergencies call; the marine facilities support busy summer commercial and recreational activities; the floats get moved to summer position and back to winter safe storage; City parks draw residents and visitors alike for recreation and public events; when the phone rings at City Hall, callers get friendly service; our finances are well-controlled and accounted for—we run a large operating surplus each year, which allows investment in capital improvements; grants fund key service and infrastructure improvements; and our staff is enabled to provide quality service that rewards their dedication to the community. *I am so grateful for, and proud of, our fine employees who make this all possible.*

Key infrastructure projects remain open and will need focus during the coming year:

- Salmon River Park play equipment addition—the equipment is in manufacturing and should ship to us this month. We will install it as soon as possible, weather permitting.
- Good River Bridge repairs—we continue to look for grant funding to address wear and tear of the 1985 structure and are looking into various approaches to assuring it will serve our community for another four decades.
- DRC Baler and compost buildings—City Administrator Kathy Leary continues to work closely with Senator Murkowski's office to keep funding earmarked for these improvements. They are key to the long-term effectiveness of our waste management program.
- Bike/pedestrian side path—we continue to seek grant funding and to work with Alaska DOT&PF to develop a safe route, separated from motorized vehicles, along Gustavus Road and Mountain View Road for pedestrians and bike riders. Sharing the road with cars whizzing by at 45 mph is not a safe situation for anyone on foot or on bike, let alone for commuting school children.
- Wilson Road drainage improvements—we need to expand the ditches and install new culverts to handle flooding from extreme rain events.
- Same Old Road—new ditches and culverts to prevent flooding and direct local rainfall toward Glens Ditch.
- Glens Ditch cleaning from Gustavus Road to the Nagoonberry Trail parking area—DOT&PF no longer accepts responsibility for keeping what previously was a platted DOT drainage easement along Glens Ditch. The city will need to assure that this critical drainage route along our Glens Ditch Road easement remains effective. The work will include replacing several undersized culverts.
- Heat pump installations for other City buildings—I hope we will continue to install heat pump systems for more city buildings as a means of assuring lower, more stable heating costs with reduced carbon emissions. It's the responsible thing to do.

Community resilience building should be a focus for the next year. The flooding here in Gustavus in December 2020 demonstrated the damage that large, climate-change-driven events can cause in our town. Events in Juneau and Maui in recent months reinforce the need for all municipalities to upgrade infrastructure and preparedness for emergency response to disasters of increasing scale with climate change and other drivers. Here in Gustavus our primary disaster potentials are:

- Flooding from atmospheric river events,
- Heavy snowfall events or heavy overall snow winters that stress our ability to keep roads open and functional,
- Wildfire that spreads through dry grasses (like those at Maui) and dense forests;
- Earthquake
- Tsunami
- Mass casualty events

Our rising population means more residents, businesses, structures, and visitors at risk of fires and an increasing level of EMS calls.

In response, since December 2020, we have applied over \$200,000 in FEMA funding, plus city capital funding toward substantial road system improvements that enhance serviceability and will capture and control flood water in extreme events. We have improved road cul-de-sacs and road edges to provide for more effective snow removal. These improve resilience but as noted above, *there is more to do*.

Regardless of infrastructure hardening and improvements, we will still have emergencies that require immediate response to aid citizens. We have a capable volunteer fire department, but dedicated volunteers are stretched thinly and need more skill development to meet future service demands. It is time to take our department to a new, higher level. Fire Chief Sol Martinez has been tasked with building department capacity through recruiting and skill development training to position us for the challenges of the future. In support of his efforts, we have added a temporary EMS Coordinator to focus on boosting training and readiness of the EMS side. This month we invited Fire Department Medical Director Dr. Rod Vaught, MD, and retired Sitka Fire Chief Dave Miller to work with Chief Martinez to review our department and provide guidance for making step improvements. The review team will report results to the council. Note that these two performed a similar service for us back in 2016 that led to substantial training improvements then. I am so pleased that they are willing to assist us again in this manner. In further support of strengthening of the department, we have included a substantial boost in training and travel funding for Fire Department staff and volunteers in the budget adjustment NCO on the agenda for introduction this month. The funding source is identified surplus revenue carry over from the last fiscal year—money already in the bank. Putting some of last year's surplus toward assuring more effective emergency response in Gustavus is a valuable investment.

In closing I must express my gratitude to the candidates who offered their community service in standing for election to the City Council and to the local and District School boards. We can all be proud of our local democracy in support of a community that works!

Mike

Mike Taylor
Mayor, City of Gustavus