

THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

Retiring DPW Director to be Replaced by Pair of Former Hires

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

The best advice Bob Studt, Ithaca's director of public works, might have for his forthcoming replacements is to be ever cognizant of the "public" in that job title. Serving the community has been a focal point of his position for 15 years. After his retirement on May 2, Brandon Smith and Jarred Waldron will be taking on shared directorship roles.

Both men, who Studt hired within the last decade, will continue in supervisory positions with the increased responsibility that accompanies their new roles. Waldron will become the water and sewer superintendent. Smith will head the other efforts as defined by public works, effectively anything to do with streets, parks, and cemeteries.

"When Bob informed me of his retirement plan back in 2019, I knew it was going to be difficult to replace him," said Jamey Conn, Ithaca's city manager. "I had this 'outside-of-the-box idea' and discussed it at length with Bob over the past few months. It came about because it will save the city a good deal of money on an annual basis, and we have a couple crew members with vast experience. One on the water and sewer side and the other on the public works side of the department. It's going to take the right kind of people for this plan to work long term. Time will tell, but I believe Brandon and Jarred can be those right people."

That hiring from within dovetails nicely with Conn's philosophy of rewarding workers for jobs well done, along with eliminating a potentially long learning curve by hiring someone from elsewhere. "The guys already know everything about the town and we're not going to have to teach someone coming in," said Studt, who was involved in hiring his replacements.

Their familiarity with the town and the job will aid both Smith and Waldron in roles that make them

representatives of the city. "You're working with the public, who have concerns that are very meaningful to them," Studt said. "You have to do what you can to accommodate their needs. Hopefully, it's a problem we can take care of. But you really have to learn how to work with the public in this job."

As much as the directors can make forecasts and schedule seasonal jobs, such as the mowing that comes in spring and summer and the water main projects in sight, having to turn on a dime is not uncommon. "You can't always plan your day or your week because things pop up," Studt said.

Smith knows that to be true. "We tend to look at things by the season," he said. "There are lots of projects scheduled for when the weather breaks. Still, sometimes I'll come to work thinking about what's on the agenda, but a half hour into the day the whole crew has moved to a different project."

Regardless of the day-to-day, which will be familiar with the added paperwork, Smith is up for the challenge. "I've been here nine and a half years, which gives me a fair amount of experience," he said. "I'm looking forward to serving the public."

With a shared crew of six employees, plus another two or three seasonal hires in the summer, Waldron also sees much of his job remaining the same. "The most change will be on the administrative side," he said.

The challenges of COVID-19 illustrated the need to adapt to the unexpected. Over the pandemic, Conn suggested staggering the crews to lessen the chance of everyone having to quarantine at the same time. That plan has been largely successful in keeping the public works ongoing with essential employees.

In addition to serving the public, Smith will work closely with engineers and contractors on various projects. Studt said those relationships require both tact and compromise, as the director tries



Outside City Hall (left to right) Bob Studt, Ithaca director of public works, with Jarred Waldron and Brandon Smith, the two men, both previously hired by Studt, who will replace him after his May 2 retirement. (Herald photo - Meiners)

to determine what's best for the city. Additionally, working with the state has its own challenges. "Not because they're hard to work with," he said. "It's because there are so many reports and there's a lot to them."

Still, Studt believes the city is in good hands with two supervisors uniquely qualified for their specific roles. Waldron has state certifications in water and sewage. Smith's on-the-job training prepped him for the various public works duties — from leading snowplow crews to handling unforeseen emergencies. Clear, coolheaded leadership will serve both men well in dealing with everything from the waterline breaks to the standard scheduling that helps keep a city running.

Given that the position of a public works director is defined by maintaining the various physical structures that allow a city to run smoothly, it's no wonder how upsetting it can be when those things

fall off course. Road closures and water main breaks can affect anyone's daily routine. A levelheaded director can both deal with public concerns and take the necessary action to get things back up and running.

Studt will not be riding off into the sunset. At least not too far into it. And Conn said he doesn't plan to lose his number, even as Studt jokes about changing it. "Bob has 30 years of experience, the last 15 being with the City of Ithaca," Conn said. "His knowledge of public works and the city's infrastructure has been an invaluable asset for Ithaca. Bob was recently depicted as being in the top 1 percent of operators by our EGLE [Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy] engineer. I have enjoyed working with Bob the past 15 months and we will miss not only his knowledge but his good nature. Bob is the type of guy that is willing to

help us out any time his expertise may be needed."

Before his 15 years in Ithaca, Studt had done the same job in his hometown of Ashley for 15 years. Now 62 years old, Studt said he had been eyeing retirement for some time, putting it off over the last couple of years. He and his wife have a place on Houghton Lake, and he's looking into making up for some lost time with his grown children and grandchildren.

"I'm ready to retire," Studt said. "I love to do woodworking and I've got a shop in the garage."

He doesn't sell the furniture he builds. Not yet anyway, instead making it for himself or his family. Even with lake plans and woodworking projects on the horizon, the affable Studt is likely to take any calls from the city manager or the younger men stepping into his old shoes. A public servant to the end, he'll be a wise source of counsel for Ithaca officials.

ECONOMIC UPSWING: DDA Director Sees Bright Future for St. Louis

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

New businesses in old buildings speak to the rich history of downtown St. Louis. With origin dates etched in stone and brick, you can bet that 4 Seasons Gym didn't set up its weight shop here in 1917. Just up Mill Street, "Dental Rooms" — a permanent, ominous warning between two windows of a building erected in 1881 — may have had anyone in 19th century thinking they could live with that achy tooth. And above Kubin's Furniture & Mattresses, where the raised brick signifies the building's beginnings in 1908, the neon "Go Sharks!" sign in a window reflects more modern times.

Yet through all of that history, from the boomtown with mineral springs to the toxic tragedy left by a negligent chemical company 100 years later, St. Louis could be seen as something of a fighter's town. More than a few proprietors have had to pick themselves up from the dusty ground. Now, nearing a post-pandemic world, where economic downturns shuttered doors from downtown eateries through suburban sneaker outlets, business is looking to rebound. Everywhere, not just here.

Though St. Louis may just be made for the bounce back.

Historic launch

For nearly a quarter of a century, the St. Louis City Council has looked to rebuild its town from the center out. Phil Hansen, the economic development director with the

Downtown Development Authority, remembers those early days of the late 1990s. Then the new guy charged with discouraging some old ways of thinking, Hansen said the downtown had nowhere to go but up.

"This was still in the aftermath of Velsicol Chemical fallout, which had a far-reaching effect," Hansen said. "There were lots of empty and rundown downtown buildings."

All the result of a lack of businesses and uninterested owners who did not care to restore buildings to workable and livable spaces. There were some significant victories at first. Through brownfield redevelopment, they turned some old gas stations into green spaces for a car wash and a muffler and brake shop.

Getting a McDonald's in St. Louis was a big deal. A town without the Golden Arches might just seem un-American. Small successes led to others. "The buildings did not cost too much to buy," Hansen said. "And if you put some sweat equity into it, you could get something up and running pretty quickly."

Even with the new businesses, the nod to the past seemed critical. The Victorian streetlights, which cleared out some overhead wires, and the listing on the National Register of Historic Places, continued to lend to the quaint, downtown feel. The new City Hall, reconfigured from an old IGA grocery store in 2015, offers a large parking lot for the Farmer's Market in summer. It certainly made sense for signs along I27 to beckon travelers

to by St. Louis' historic downtown.

A refurbished public swimming pool near downtown, even though it could not be used in the 2020 summer of COVID-19, promises to be another gathering spot in the hotter days to come. That forward thinking, in an effort to overcome the troubles of the past, seems to be a through line of city planners.

As a result of that good "group think," Hansen, who needed some thick skin when he first took the job, has built on good relationships. "We've always had a really good City Council here," Hansen said. "If you come to them with something that's good for the town, unless it's fiscally irresponsible, they say go ahead and do it. There's no one in anyone's way here. That's always been the case since I've been here."

Rebound and reboot

Having hopefully weathered the worst of a global health crisis, the owners of these businesses surely look forward to getting back to work. "Despite the pandemic, we have not lost any businesses in the Central Business District area of downtown," Hansen said. "I am mainly looking forward to getting our events back to normal to help our downtown businesses do better. The #1 Chinese Restaurant opening up recently was a nice addition and we have a couple more potential projects in the works."

Flegel Tech Repair has made a bit of a run up and down Mill Street. Starting in a tiny

space at 219 North Mill, owner Brandon Flegel then moved his business to 119 North Mill. Alongside his business partner Nicole Middleton, who operates Mom-N-Dads, which stands for Middle of the Mitten, Designs and Décor, the pair has settled nicely into 134 North Mill. The candy counters harken back to stores past.

"Most of the renovations on that building had already been made by former owner Bill Coty, but Brandon and Nicole did lots of interior work to make it their own," Hansen said.

As part of the downtown community, Flegel hopes to spread his technical expertise. "I'm a vice president of the St. Louis Tech Foundation and a member of the DDA," he said. "We hope we can contribute more to those things as we grow."

That downtown community also extends to new residents. Gemini Capital Management did the project rehab at 133 North Mill, which included the exterior upgrades to O'Boyle Insurance Associates and five brand new apartments on the second floor. "Gemini does this by working with the Michigan Economic Development Corporation," Hansen said. "So the city is not involved with any grant work on these projects."

See UPSWING on page 6



HANSEN