

Aldermen see optimism in wake of COVID

Lake Ozark officials continue to be cautiously optimistic regarding an unexpected uptick in the local economy.

The optimism is rooted in voter approval June 9 of two significant ballot issues that open the door to a long-needed overhaul of the city's 90 miles of streets. Voters authorized the city to incur up to \$6 million in debt over the next several years to cover the cost of construction; and voters approved a Use Tax on the online purchase of items from out-of-state vendors.

Lake Ozark staff and aldermen are also hearing encouraging news from local businesses which appear to be recovering quickly after being shuttered for about two months due to COVID-19 restrictions. After Gov. Mike Parson allowed a soft opening of businesses in early May, Lake Ozark and other lake-area businesses have seen a sudden resurgence of business.

That trend continued as good, summer-like weather blessed the lake area. Mayor Gerry Murawski reported at a board of aldermen meeting June 9 that several hundred thousand people swarmed to the lake over Memorial Day Weekend. Local lodging establishments have been fully booked nearly every weekend; long-term bookings of lodging facilities are nearly 100 percent, up considerably from normal occupancy levels; restaurants (and waterfront swimming pools) have been bulging while attempting to follow COVID-19 guidelines; boat dealers are reporting improved numbers.

"I don't think we'll see any sales tax increase until August, but I think we're pretty healthy here," one alderman commented.

A friend of his who manages several condos and homes says he's usually about 60 percent booked this time of year, but now is 100 percent booked for the next six weeks. Another alderman noted he was told that April for one large boat dealer was a record setter.

Mayor Murawski said a business owner on The Strip reported improved sales over last weekend compared to Memorial Day Weekend.

"It's a good sign," one alderman said.

"The lake is not dead," another added.

Road improvements

The buoyed discussion on the local economy led aldermen into a discussion on street improvements within the city.

Alderman Dennis Klautzer asked City Administrator Dave Van Dee what his "crystal ball" was for street improvements now that the two ballot issues were approved.

Van Dee explained that the city cannot issue any debt for construction until the city has enough unencumbered funds in the bank to cover payments on the bonds.

"You have to understand that the Use Tax and funds available won't fund all of the improvements," Van Dee explained. "I'm happy that the first two steps were approved, but we've always talked about a four-step process. That's why other avenues of funding are being explored including a Transportation Development District (TDD) and a possible property tax increase. As the Use Tax revenue goes up, we'll be able to adjust the property tax levy down."

Van Dee said he's hopeful a TDD would include Bagnell Dam Blvd. because at \$2.9 million that cost is about half of the total estimated cost of improving the streets.

Alderman Klautzer said the discussion now is when any construction projects will get started. Van Dee said income from the Use Tax won't be realized until early next year. He added, however, the city may be able to allocate resources differently to do some micro-seal projects on some streets to improve their longevity.

"If we can show some sort of progress, that will help with decisions down the road," Klautzer offered.

Other business

• Mayor Murawski said he had a plaque prepared for outgoing alderman Joe Barfield who was defeated for his Ward 3 seat by Mark Maples.

"Joe came in in a really tough time as interim city administrator and helped. He has been kind of a mentor with his experience in state and local government and his 12 years helping the City of Lake Ozark."