

City's property values stay steady

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**
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Property values in the City of Oberlin dropped slightly for budgeting for 2010, with a .65 of 1 percent decrease.

At a City Council meeting on Thursday, City Administrator Austin Gilley reviewed a budget recap of the past couple of years, giving over 2008 actual numbers and 2009 to-date numbers. Mr. Gilley stressed that what he handed out wasn't a proposed budget for the new year, but strictly a look at a "maintenance" budget designed to keep the city where it is.

He said his recommendation for the budget priorities for the new year are water, employees, a possible motel, streets and then taxes.

Looking across the state, he said, the city's employees are underpaid.

Council Roundup

At a meeting Thursday, the Oberlin City Council:

- Talked about a request for the city to spray for mosquitoes, making no decision, although the consensus was not to spray. Story on Page 9.
- Gave an engineer more ideas for the plans for the circle drive on the south side of The Gateway. Story on Page 7.
- Approved a grant application to help pay for a survey of work needed to the current runway and an aeronautical plan for the city airport in a 3-2 vote, with the mayor

breaking a tie. Story below.

- Tweaked ordinances allowing golf carts, all-terrain vehicles, "micro-utility" vehicles and work-site utility vehicles to be driven on the city streets, putting off the final vote. Story on Page 3.
- Talked with a former member about the airport project, which he said he hoped wouldn't become an opportunity missed for the city. Story below.
- Heard that the city's property values dropped slightly, a .65 of 1 percent decrease for next year. Story at left.

Some didn't get a raise this year, he said, adding that maybe the council should look at cost-of-living raises only next year.

A new motel, he said, is a priority because The Gateway probably won't survive without one.

Then in 2011, said Mr. Gilley, the city needs to plan for some budget cuts.

"The county is down significantly," he said, "so there will be political pressure not to increase taxes."

The Decatur County commissioners received numbers at the meeting Tuesday, June 23, showing a 19.7 percent decrease in valuations, mostly due to lower oil and gas land values. Commissioner Ralph Unger commented that the county

would have to raise taxes around 25 percent to bring in the same amount of money next year.

Looking at this maintenance budget, said Mr. Gilley, the good news is that the city has cash reserves and the property values have remained somewhat steady. The bad is that the spending out-paces the revenues and the reserves are depleting.

Mayor Joe Stanley said the Library Board has requested the same amount of tax money as it has received in the past at \$38,205. The library also has a fairly healthy memorial fund, he said.

The city has 26 funds, which he's tracked revenues in said Mr. Gilley, and 17 departments.

In terms of operating categories, the city is spending more than it's taking in, he said. If the city were to spend all of it's budget authority,

or what it's allowed to spend, all of the departments would be operating in the red. That isn't happening, he added, but it could.

He said he's talked with the staff recently about ways to save money, about overtime, purchasing and other issues. All purchasing, he said, now must be preapproved by the department heads for anything under \$2,500, from \$2,500 to \$10,000 by the administrator and anything \$10,000 by the council.

City employees are going to weekly time sheets, instead of monthly, making them clearer and easier to track, he said. All overtime and leave has to be preapproved by a supervisor.

Mr. Gilley said it's important to know that most of the accounting problems from the past years were (See COUNCIL on Page 12)

Council OKs grant request for airport

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**
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The Oberlin City Council approved seeking a grant to help pay for a survey for work needed to complete the current runway and an aeronautical plan for the city airport in a 3-2 vote Thursday night, with the mayor breaking a tie vote.

The total amount on the project is \$207,615, with the city paying \$10,381 and the grant application for \$197,234 from the Federal Aviation Administration.

The plan is to shorten the existing runway by 615 feet on the south side and then lengthen it 300 feet on the other end, reducing it to 3,500 feet. The project will also widen the runway from 50 to 60 feet. The program will rehabilitate and overlay the existing runway, add grading and drainage and install a medium-intensity runway lighting system and new electrical vault and a precision approach path indicator system.

There was some discussion whether the city didn't already spend \$50,000 two years ago for a survey on the repairs to the runway. This project, said Connie Grafel, marketing director for the Oberlin-Decatur Economic Development Corp., hasn't been surveyed.

"If we don't stay in the loop,"

Man pushes new runway

A former member told the Oberlin City Council on Thursday he hoped the city wouldn't miss an opportunity by not working to finish the airport project, including a 5,500-foot runway to serve business jets.

Jay Anderson, a former council member, who has been working on the airport project since its inception, said he thinks the runway is important to Oberlin's future.

Throughout the process of bringing Bus and Coach International to Jennings, he said, both Norton and Colby were waiting for the group to fail, in order to move the company to their counties.

When the bus company showed up here, there was talk about them building or finding (See MAN on Page 12)

said Ms. Grafel, "then we won't be in the loop anymore and we will get nothing done."

(See GRANT on Page 12)



ONCE A FARMER, ALWAYS A FARMER. Even though Jim Plotts can no longer help with harvest, his mind is still on the farm. Now a resident of the Cedar Living Center, Mr. Plotts made a special Father's Day trip to inspect one of his wheat fields northwest of Oberlin. If it doesn't hail, he expects it to be one of his best crops. — Herald staff photo by Carolyn Plotts

At 92, farmer fondly remembers career

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**
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At 92, Jim Plotts' experience spans harvesting with a horse-drawn header, combines without an enclosed cab and farming with air conditioning, four-wheel-drive tractors, 30-foot combines and all that modern stuff.

Mr. Plotts, who now lives at the Cedar Living Center, remembers farming with his father Leroy as a young boy. One time, he said, he was on the big iron platform on the back of a header and saw a rattlesnake. His father got down from the implement and killed the snake.

Mr. Plotts said they could do 40 acres a day with the horse-drawn header, which cut and windrowed the wheat. The wheat then was picked up, piled in a stack and in a month to six weeks after harvest, they got the threshing machine out.

There were threshing crews, like custom harvesters today, who came in and did the job. Today's combine does the work of a header and a thresher, hence the name.

Mr. Plotts said he purchased the original Plotts farm, where he grew up. He now owns 1,000 acres that he farms with his son Gene Plotts and grandson, Buddy Plotts.

He said he raised his kids on that farm, half a mile from where he grew up. He has three children, Gene who lives on the farm; Jim Plotts, of Norcat; and Mary Bennet, who lives outside McCook.

In 1929, said Mr. Plotts, he purchased his first combine from a dealer in Curtis, Neb. He didn't remember what he paid for the machine, but he said, it was a joke, compared to prices today, when a new combine can cost more than \$300,000.

In 1942, Mr. Plotts said, he bought his first self-propelled combine in McCook. It was a second-hand International.

Over the years, he said, he's owned six combines, mostly International and Case. All of them plus others are still at the farm. Some are in use and the old ones were kept for parts.

He smiled as he remembered that yields

when he first started farming were 13 to 14 bushels per acre and wheat prices were close to \$1 a bushel. Nowadays, people say a good crop brings 40 bushels per acre and the price Monday was \$4.66 a bushel.

After farming the majority of his life — he only retired one year ago after a farm accident cost him his leg — Mr. Plotts had lots of stories to tell, including the one about when he was hauling a combine home from just south of Hoxie. When he drove under the railroad overpass on U.S. 83, he said, it didn't clear and the bridge ripped the air conditioner off the machine.

Farming has changed over the years, he said, going from horse-drawn machines to the big, powerful ones today. Mr. Plotts said he could remember sitting on that platform telling his father that if they didn't buy a tractor, he wasn't going to stay on the farm.

His father, said Mr. Plotts, took four mules to Cambridge and traded them into the International dealer, along with \$1,050 for a (See FARMER on Page 12)

Just scooting around



ON THE FOURTH OF JULY, Jim Marshall rode a three-wheel scooter during a parade at the Good Samaritan Center. — Herald staff photo by Kimberly Davis

Used part gets power back to normal

The city's power supply is back to normal after the foreman and line-man had to operate the power plant for more than three days last week.

The evening of Saturday, June 27, the tap contacts in the main transformer at the city's substation north of U.S. 36 failed, shutting off all power in Oberlin. In no time, Foreman Dan Castle and Lineman Ron Solko had the power plant running, generating 60 percent of the city's power. The other 40 percent was

carried by connections to the rural lines of Prairie Land Electric.

Throughout the event, City Administrator Austin Gilley kept the council, city staff and others informed by e-mail.

By 2 p.m. last Wednesday, he said, the transformer was fixed and 60 percent of the city was back on regular power, generated and purchased from Sunflower Electric Power Corp. of Hays through the substation. At 7 a.m. Thursday, the western

half of the city was switched back on and by 7:30 a.m., the eastern half, said Mr. Gilley.

Solomon Corp., from southeast of Salina, came out last Monday to look at the transformer and ordered a part.

That part, said Mr. Gilley, was picked up by Mayor Joe Stanley in Colby the next day, but turned out to be the wrong part.

The crew from Solomon turned up a used part last Wednesday which

was then put into the transformer.

There's no telling what the outage will cost the city. Mr. Gilley said he's still working on the figures.

He said he couldn't be happier with the way the crew responded to the emergency.

They did a good job and responded as quickly as possible, he said. With their actions, he added, they avoided what could have been a much worse problem.

*Council starts budget process for next year

(Continued from Page 1A) not staff problems, but because of the accounting system. The computer system has since been upgraded, he said.

It's important to know what things cost, he added because without that, it's hard to make cuts. Money will be transferred into the actual departments and then those departments will pay for their items. For example, money to pay for the park supervisor will be taken out of the park department, and so will the benefits.

Two certificates of deposit, around \$97,000, have been moved from the general fund to The Gateway fund, he said, since they think it's part of the original money used to build the civic center.

"My professional opinion is that the electric fund can no longer rescue The Gateway," Mr. Gilley added.

The city will have to start repairing power lines and the infrastructure, he said. The city is at a point where only so many things can be transferred out of the fund. The city has taken money from the electric fund for years to subsidize Gateway operation. Last year, the amount was \$110,000 budgeted to transfer, but with the Bremer money there wasn't a need to transfer any, and this year the city has budgeted to transfer \$50,000, but nothing has been transferred so far.

There's \$198,462 in the Economic Development fund, he said, with \$65,000 set aside for a wetlands at Sappa Park, \$25,000 for a hotel and the potential to pay for restrooms at Sappa Park and Fourth of July fireworks out of that money.

The airport grant fund has a negative balance, he said, adding that he's not sure why. The auditors are looking at it.

One thing needed for the airport project, he said, is a revolving fund to pay bills while the city is waiting for reimbursement on items that have already been paid for. Numbers show that the city could be out \$1.5 million for three months to a year waiting for reimbursements from the Federal Aviation Administration, he said. The city could be forced to make vendors wait for payments until the reimbursed money gets here. That might work and it might not, he said.

It seems that a lot of this is how the

city is going to pay for the airport, said Councilwoman Rhonda May, but it seems like other cities have been through this and it's worked.

The city will have to have a rolling fund, said Mr. Gilley, adding that he's not saying it's impossible, just it could be a tight process. In theory, the city could be out a fairly large amount of the money for a while.

That other communities have done this before is a good point, said Greg Lohofener, with the Oberlin-Decatur Economic Development Corp.

Bucher Willis and Ratliff, the engineers working on the airport plan, was projecting that the city would buy 345 acres for a 7,000 foot runway in two years, said Connie Grafel, marketing director for the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp., but the focus for now is on building a 5,500 foot runway first.

Mr. Gilley said they owed a big thanks to Ms. Grafel, who he said is doing a fantastic job with the paperwork on that project.

Councilman Bill Riedel said it might be good to invest some of The Gateway gift money, because if the city uses it to update the building and then to operate in 2010, the city will still need to operate or do updates in years after that.

The city is limited to investing money in savings accounts and certificate of deposits, said Mayor Joe Stanley.

Mr. Riedel said the big concern is that the city needs to look at how to increase Oberlin's appeal to people outside the community, yet the infrastructure is collapsing. Look at the condition of the piece of water main on Mr. Gilley's desk, he said. Look at the leaning power poles in alleys around town.

Although boosters are trying to get people here from other places, he said, the city needs to take care of those who live here first and then let them bring others in.

The city needs to look at and spend its money wisely, said Mr. Riedel. Just because the city has the Bremer money doesn't mean that it just needs to spend it or the reserves. The city should start tightening its belt now.

The city needs to dip into its reserves some, said Mr. Gilley, adding that he agreed with Mr. Riedel about conserving now, too.



Families go play at pool

AT THE OBERLIN pool on Saturday, manager Andrew Dempewolf (above) threw money into the water for the "money dive game" on the Fourth of July. Dakota Tate (left) and Alyssa VanVleet and Tyler Bruggeman and Miki Dorshorst (right) waited for their chance to find the money. Ryan May (left) tried his best to throw a baseball at the dunk tank to make a lifeguard take a cold swim.

— Herald staff photos by Kimberly Davis

*Man stresses need for airport

(Continued from Page 1A) their own runway. The company, he said, didn't ask for any money and actually originally wanted to buy land at the airport, but the Federal Aviation Administration said they couldn't do that.

Dr. Anderson went through a rundown of the meetings they have had for the airport project, including the first one at The Gateway when they filled the room, then onto Kansas City, Hays and Topeka. Throughout the project, he said, state and other officials have been shocked at the number of people from Oberlin at the meetings and the number of people who support the project.

With that, he said, the city's project jumped ahead of two other airport projects in the state.

The group talked with the Kansas National Guard about being a "spoke" training center in a hub program, said Dr. Anderson.

Bus and Coach International, he said, had started to do some refurbishing of used buses at the Jennings plant and the group got a picture of what might be. At that time, there were two people from the company flying in and out of here.

A "working committee" was formed to guide the project. That committee consists of Jim Wesch, former engineer; Sid Metcalf, Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp. chairman; Gaylord Shields, community member; Jay Anderson, a former city councilman; Marcia Lohofener, a current council member; Lee Franklin, farmer; Doyle Brown, a former county

commissioner; Gene Gallentine, current commissioner for District 3; Phil Fraker, representing the airport operator; Connie Grafel, economic development marketing director; and Mayor Joe Stanley, although everyone isn't always able to attend.

The group has been working on three main things, he said: getting a core industry here, what to do with the former boys ranch and getting labor for employers here.

Dr. Anderson said they are starting to look at different marketing methods, knowing they are going to have to go out and make a hard sell. The runway has to be large enough for a medical plane, tourism and business, he said.

On the current runway, turbo-prop air ambulances can land, but not business jets or jet ambulances.

"The airport becomes an economic development cog," said Dr. Anderson, "that we didn't have before."

This is a working volunteer group, he said.

They appreciate the encouragement they get from the city and appreciate City Administrator Austin Gilley letting Connie Grafel, marketing director for the Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp., work with them.

"We have been a community of missed opportunities," said Dr. Anderson, "with the railroad, community college, prison and wheelchair company."

"I would hope that we aren't again missing an opportunity."

*Farmer remembers lifetime on job

(Continued from Page 1A) combine.

Besides farming, he said, he taught school for a few years, two of them in a country school close to Danbury and then at Northern Valley Country Schools. When he started teaching, he made \$55 a month.

He also did some custom terracing and in his spare time he did carpentry, building 10 houses after 1975.

Back in the early days, said Mr. Plotts, there was a sale pavilion in Oberlin, where the post office is today.

"Dad bought a 500-pound sow there that was going to have pig-

lets," he recalled. "Dad was scared of that pig. One day he found me in the pen sitting in the middle of a puddle of pigs."

Mr. Plotts said he was only 5 at the time.

He said he helped his mother feed the chickens and remembers being able to hear his father's wagon pulling in when he was still miles up the road.

They had coal-oil lamps and then a generator. It was 1950 before the farm got electricity. He added they always had a radio, operated by batteries.

On Saturdays, the family got cleaned up and headed into town to go to the "picture show."

Mr. Plotts said he thinks it cost 15 cents.

In 1941, he married Margie Bogart. They belonged to nine square dancing clubs. He said that several others from the neighborhood went with them. He said the couple attended Olive Chapel Methodist Church.

Besides growing wheat, he also grew corn, milo and cane, and the couple raised lots of cattle. That included 25 milk cows, which they milked by hand before the bought a milking machine.

Before harvest this year, Mr. Plotts went to the wheat field with his son Jim and Jim's wife Carolyn and son James. He said the wheat

looked good. It had a dry spell a while back, which hurt it some, he said, adding that he thought it would be the best harvest he'd seen.

It's been four years since Mr. Plotts drove the combine, bringing in his wheat. Two years ago, he drove the truck, but then his eyesight wouldn't let him continue.

Nowadays, he said, farming would be a hard career for a guy to start in, what with the cost of land and machinery. Back when he started, a guy just had to own a plow, a disc and some land to farm.

"It was a good life," said Mr. Plotts, adding that he doubted he would have done anything different had he the chance.

*Grant request for runway survey approved, sent in

(Continued from Page 1A)

Councilman Bill Riedel said he wondered why the city owns the airport and not the county, since it serves the whole county. He said he doesn't understand why the taxpayers of the city are the only ones that support the airport.

Members of the development board, said Ms. Grafel, have asked the commissioners to ask for money

to support the airport project the past two years. The first year the group asked for \$40,000 and the second \$50,000.

Mr. Riedel said if the city gets the grant and gets 95 percent of the money back, that's great, but in a few years when they are working on the project to build a longer runway, and the city share is \$240,000, the townspeople shouldn't have to foot

all of the bill for it.

Councilwoman Rhonda May made a motion to apply for the grant, and Councilman Ray Ward seconded it.

Both Councilman Rob McFee and Mr. Riedel cast "no" votes, with Mayor Joe Stanley breaking the tie vote with a yes. Councilwoman Marcia Lohofener was absent.



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