

A DAY IN THE LIFE ...

In 2014, The MML Review is featuring insights from local government officials across the state in the series, "A Day In The Life." In this issue, The Review asked several Missouri Public Works Directors to share what inspired them to serve in their community and other questions to provide a glimpse into their role as city leaders.

Greg Hayes, City Engineer, City of Fulton

David Miller, City Engineer / Director of Public Works, City of Branson

John Zimmerman, Assistant Director of Public Works, City of St. Charles

Jody Carlson, Director of Public Works and Transportation, City of St. Joseph

WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Hayes: Serving the people to give them a better place to live and raise a family.

Miller: By working for a local government, the harder I work, the more it helps to better the lives of my friends and neighbors. In private practice, the harder I work may only increase the profits of the entity that owns the firm.

Zimmerman: The opportunity to be able to help people in the community I work, be it through implementation of winter and emergency weather operations (snow/floods/tornadoes/etc.) or maintaining essential municipal infrastructure (sanitary and storm sewer systems/potable water system/roadways/etc.) that is critical to public health and safety.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY?

Miller: It is a friendly, safe and caring community with a great deal of patriotism. The health of the environment is important to everyone and there is a community-wide culture of "family," fun and the need to work together to improve the city.

Zimmerman: The people. The residents of St. Charles are wonderful and very appreciative of the efforts the public works (department) puts forth; the elected officials who support the capital improvement programs to maintain the City's infrastructure; and last but not least the city employees who are the lifeblood of public works — the dedicated men and women who work tirelessly day in day out, sometimes with little or no sleep, and under extremely difficult physical

conditions (cold/heat/rain/snow) to serve the City's residents.

Carlson: I love that we are a mixed group of people that are simply living out our lives together. I love that we all have our differences, but it's our similarities that motivates, encourages and brings us together. I also value the fact that we have a rich heritage and vibrant future ahead of us.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT MANAGING PUBLIC WORKS IN YOUR CITY?

Hayes: It has to be the overall diversity of the job. Since we own and manage all of our utilities you never know exactly what challenges the day will bring. One minute you might be talking about a sanitary sewer project, the next you'll be leading discussion on the street overlay program and then before the day is done you'll open the bids to demolish an old city-owned structure. There is never a dull day.

Zimmerman: Change is integral to managing public works; each day brings new and exciting challenges — be it related to major infrastructure undertakings, weather- and climate-related events and environmental, social or other topical issues of the day that affect the lives of people.

I also enjoy the opportunity to work with a great group of people, in and out of City Hall, who are devoted to finding innovative solutions and dedicated to improving the lives of residents.

Carlson: I truly enjoy getting to know and work with so many of the community leaders. Our community has some great leaders within it that work to make positive improvements daily as well as for the generations to come.

WHAT PUBLIC WORKS PROJECT HAVE YOU MOST ENJOYED?

Hayes: Although I know the most important jobs are completed underground, it's those projects like water towers and roadway improvement projects that you can see and say, "Hey, I had a part in that."

Miller: The redevelopment of the City's downtown area to create a shopping/entertainment/lifestyle center that has become a major destination for people. Nearly 100 percent of the existing infrastructure was removed and reconstructed on an accelerated schedule.

Zimmerman: One of the most challenging projects though has been managing the current structural rehabilitation of the City Hall parking structure. As part of this effort, the City undertook an extensive four-month public involvement process to engage residents, the business community, city/county/state and private employees, and elected officials to evaluate options to mitigate or offset the loss of approximately 400 parking spaces in the congested downtown business district and government complex.

The recommended plan implemented closing the parking structure entirely during construction, relocating public parking for the estimated six-month construction period to a remote site; engaging a private transit service to provide transportation seven days a week to and from the remote site to the downtown business district and government complex; and developing additional contingencies for special event parking, holiday festivals, and if the remote site were to become inundated due to Missouri River flooding.

MISSOURI PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTORS

Carlson: We have almost completed the largest (financial) project in the history of St. Joseph. It is a stormwater separation project in the combined sewer portion of our City. However, we just now are undertaking the “new” largest (financial) project in the history of the City that will construct a new ammonia removal facility, biosolids dryer, grit removal system and other smaller combined projects at our Water Protection Facility. On the heels of these two projects will come yet another project that could be twice the cost of these two projects. This “newest” project will involve separating storm water via a large lengthy tunnel, as well as constructing additional flood control measures through wet detention storage areas, roadway realignments, and the potential for several above ground amenities to make a great improvement for our community. These are all very important projects for today and many generations to come.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE IN YOUR POSITION?

Hayes: Funding. Like most communities, the City has so many needs, but only so many funds available. It’s hard to tell someone that the project in their neighborhood isn’t as important or valuable to the overall community as someone else’s (project).

Zimmerman: Succession planning – with each passing day the City’s workforce ages and it becomes increasingly apparent how important it is to institutionalize individual knowledge and experience of key employees before they retire. As important, if not more, is developing the skills and preparing younger employees to be able to step into leadership roles.

In today’s economy it is no surprise that budgets continue to shrink or at best remain static, yet public infrastructure needs continue to grow. There is intense pressure to do more with fewer resources to extend the life of critical infrastructure. In recent years the focus has become how to implement new technologies and work smarter, empower employees to increase productivity and develop equipment and vehicle replacement strategies to optimize budgetary constraints.

Carlson: One of the biggest hurdles often times is to get people to think long term. We all prefer immediate gratification; however, most things in life that have lasting value

require a significant investment of energy and time to develop and implement.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A NEW PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR, OR SOMEONE CONSIDERING THE FIELD?

Hayes: Do not make any rash decisions, make sure you have plenty of supporting information, be flexible, make sure you have evaluated the entire situation and don’t be afraid to go big. However, the number one rule is “Do it right the first time!”

Miller: The mandated and required procedures to implement nearly every project add significant time and complexity to every assignment. In many instances, what would be a simple construction project for a private company can take weeks of time to follow all the essential processes for bidding, bid awards, contract documents, etc. – and every step must be completed without error.

Zimmerman: It is no longer sufficient to only be technically competent, in today’s political environment you must also be able to think strategically and be able to communicate concepts to key stakeholders (elected officials, residents, business groups, employees, etc.) in order to gain consensus for critical initiatives.

WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD, WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GREW UP?

Hayes: I had no idea, so I went with what came easy and that was math. It’s my guardian personality that directed me towards the public works sector.

Miller: A forest ranger.

Zimmerman: When I was 4 or 5 (years old) I went back and forth between wanting to be a cowboy or a superhero; by 5th or 6th grade I set aside my childhood aspirations and decided to become a civil engineer like my father.

Carlson: I wanted to be an astronaut or build houses. Unfortunately, growing up in a small, rural Missouri town, there weren’t any astronaut internships nearby, so I ended up carrying lumber and learning how to build houses! My dad would tell me often, “son, there isn’t anything that you and I can tear up so bad that somebody, somewhere can’t put it back together.” So we would

tear into things ... and invariably we would get them put back together (ok ... maybe a few extra nuts and bolts left over!) I believe it was that mindset from my father, and my love for constructing things that pushed me into the engineering field.

MOST PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED TO LEARN ...

Miller: The amount of traveling I have done around the United States. From the time I was a child, my family took five-week-long summer trips in the RV and I have continued to take my family on many long vacations every summer. I have been to every state and nearly every national park and historic site and most larger metropolitan areas.

Zimmerman: My wife is a musician with the St. Louis Symphony.

Carlson: I am still an adrenaline junkie. I love to ride my motocross motorcycle and absolutely love pushing speed to the limit in various applications. However, I also find bow hunting and running very therapeutic, although with six children, the frequency of those priorities is purposely pushed down on the list right now!

TO WHAT LOCATION WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO TRAVEL, AND WHY?

Hayes: Perth, Australia. My foreign exchange student from high school lives there. He has come back to the USA plenty of times. I would really like to visit him sometime.

Miller: I have never been to Europe and believe it would be interesting to travel in Germany and Belgium, especially in Oktoberfest.

Zimmerman: That is a challenging question, so many places so little time – but if pushed: Israel, the Mideast, and Italy – to retrace the steps of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, study religious artifacts, buildings, and infrastructure that to this day still function; Alaska – the grandeur and majesty of the glaciers, mountains, wildlife, one of the great wilderness frontiers.

Carlson: I have been blessed to travel to over 20 countries outside of the U.S., Canada and Mexico. However, I have not been as far east as China. I would love to see the Great Wall and what stood as a divider from others for so many centuries. □