

# A DAY IN THE LIFE ... OF MISSOURI MAYORS

*In 2014, The MML Review will feature insights from local government officials across the state in a new series, "A Day In The Life." In this issue, the Review asked several Missouri mayors to share their goals for 2014, what inspired them to serve in their community and other questions to provide a glimpse into their role as city leaders.*

**Mayor Gerry Welch, Webster Groves**

**Mayor Raeanne Presley, Branson**

**Mayor Sly James, Kansas City**

**Mayor Bill Kolas, Higginsville**

## WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

**Mayor Presley:** After a large portion of Hwy. 76 was annexed by the city of Branson, they were seeking citizens to serve on the Planning and Zoning Board. I thought it would be interesting and would allow me a chance to have a night away from our two young and rambunctious sons!

**Mayor James:** My interest began with a desire to see my city, Kansas City, recognized and appreciated for its tremendous assets, people and potential.

**Mayor Kolas:** I had been disappointed with some of the lack of improvements of city services, namely the city streets. After numerous attempts to have the street I lived on repaired, as well as other obvious problems in the city, I chose to run for the board of aldermen, and see if I could do something about it from that position.

## WHAT GOALS DO YOU HAVE FOR 2014 IN YOUR CITY?

**Mayor Welch:** There are some nice operational goals like addressing the beautification and safety issues at our main intersection in the City to building on our designation as the Creative Community of Missouri this year by including more public art and completing our Sculpture Garden. But our biggest goal is to ensure that legislative changes to the tax structure do not harm us. Webster Groves is home to so many regional

nonprofits (more than any other community) that educate the region's elementary and secondary children, provide social services and residential facilities to youth in crisis, offer a college and seminary education, and provide housing for hundreds of seniors.

The City provides police, fire, EMT, and other local services for all of these facilities. Our goal is to be effective in our communication to legislators about the need for some regional sharing of tax dollars to continue to service these regional nonprofits.

**Mayor Presley:** Our board has designated two revitalization projects — the Spirit of 76 and Historic Downtown — as the top priorities. Our City will continue controlling our costs internally and work with community leaders to encourage new projects within our City. We're pleased to see an expansion of health care by Cox and Mercy that will lead to an expansion of quality jobs for our citizens.

### Mayor James:

- Decrease crime.
- Increase education opportunities.
- Continue the upward trend of the local economy.
- Continue to make city government more innovative.

## WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY?

**Mayor Welch:** We represent what it really means to live in a community — a place where people care about each other, know and support their local businesses, and have enormous pride about their homes, gardens, neighborhoods, schools, churches, events and more. I love the non-pretentious way our residents go about their daily lives watching out for their neighbors and friends; volunteering for scouting and athletic and school and

event activities; taking care of their property and enjoying the company of each other. There is no better place to live than Webster Groves!

**Mayor Presley:** The hard-working generous individuals that call Branson home. We are primarily a service industry that comes with its own challenges. However, tourism is an uplifting occupation and we're blessed to live in a community with strong faith, a desire to preserve our environment, and compassion to those in need.

**Mayor Kolas:** It is a can-do attitude. There is and has always been an attitude that, we as a community can accomplish what we decide is important that will add to our quality of life. There are more than 80 separate groups, boards and organizations, plus the city that come together when there is a need to make things better.

## WHAT IS A LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE?

**Mayor Presley:** Our Spirit of 76 is top of mind. It includes a focus on making our main tourism corridor more pedestrian friendly. We plan to bury utility lines, expand walking opportunities and mix in a few surprises of fun for our visitors and locals.

**Mayor James:** I want to change the conversation around education in this City. I want anyone who is truly committed to education reform, to stop playing politics and make the necessary investment to get the job done. That means we must be as committed to investing in education, our social infrastructure, as we are in investing in our physical infrastructure like roads and bridges. That means you defend every child's right to have a first-class education with as much passion as you would defend every adult's right to have a gun. I want education to be our

priority and an attainable goal for every child in Kansas City.

**Mayor Kolas:** A four-lane Missouri Highway 13 from Clinton, Mo. north to Hamilton, Mo. About seven miles of MO 13 travels within the city limits of our community. Traffic mobility and safety are concerns now that will only increase as time goes by. Also, improvements to MO Hwy. 13 will encourage development along the route bringing new businesses and residents. This will surely bring added revenue to our tax rolls allowing for more improvements to the City.

### WHAT IS THE MOST CHALLENGING ASPECT OF YOUR POSITION AS AN ELECTED OFFICIAL?

**Mayor Welch:** The biggest challenge is always balancing the interests of the individual and those of the community, something that faces most elected officials. We deal with it in everything from fence ordinances to zoning to tax policy. This is why decision making must be done thoughtfully with good information, and why there are sometimes restless nights of sleep – or no sleep. This ranges from the increase in trash rates that could hurt low-income seniors but provide yard waste relief for most of the City to a needed new addition to the library that could impact the immediate neighbors.

**Mayor Presley:** I wish that we heard more often from citizens about their desires. People assume that everyone communicates, and some do, but it is difficult to engage the population in ways that bring positive ideas to the table. We need everyone in the conversation to make our community the best it can be.

**Mayor James:** Time management.

**Mayor Kolas:** We try very hard to keep the public informed of decisions being made by the mayor and board of alderman. We invite the movers and shakers in our community to join us in a round table discussion. When information concerning an idea or future project is presented and understood, the mood is positive and we move ahead with the work to be done. If this does not happen, then incorrect information becomes the norm and we stand still or go backwards

instead of moving ahead. I am pleased to say that, while there will always be rumors, more than 80 percent of the time the citizens have backed the decisions coming out of City Hall. We are a progressive city

### PLEASE TELL US ABOUT A PARTICULARLY MEMORABLE CITY EVENT WHERE YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE.

**Mayor Welch:** There are so many of these. This past year at our September Jazz Fest opening, our firefighters attached a large flag to our fire truck ladder and raised it to a patriotic musical opening by the Air Force Band. It flew so high against a perfectly blue sky and somehow the firefighters and Air Force members and the music brought tears to so many of us.

We have a Senior Roundtable group that provides Christmas gifts and visits to seniors without families. Not only are the visits memorable, but the calls and notes that say thank you are to be treasured.

And, those visits with school children are always wonderful. This is the best part of the job! Most memorable was the second grader who asked if I came to their school in my limousine!!!!

**Mayor Presley:** Our Centennial was a special celebration, bringing together young and old to focus on values we cherish and wish to preserve. On a less happy note, the Leap Day tornado of 2012, while fortunately causing no loss of life, brought us together in a time of crisis. I was proud of our community in the ways they shared and lifted up those who had suffered terrible losses.

**Mayor James:** I really loved the inaugural picnic that we had with city workers rather than an inaugural ball with corporate and civic folks. We did have some corporate and civic folks attend the picnic so in that regard, it was a truer representation of the City and something I just really enjoyed being in attendance for.

### WHAT IS THE ONE THING YOU WISH EVERY CITIZEN WOULD UNDERSTAND ABOUT LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

**Mayor Welch:** Local government affects the quality of their lives every day – from the streets to public safety to parks and recreation. Local government

officials are your friends and neighbors who work hard to improve their communities. They like to hear from their constituents and they want to make the right decisions.

**Mayor Presley:** That so many decisions that matter to their daily lives are made by leaders who live right down the street from them. From the quality of their schools, to the condition of the roads, to the water they drink, to the response time of police and fire. These critical services are not provided, generally, by state or federal government, but are the best efforts of many volunteers, both elected and appointed.

**Mayor Kolas:** How local government works, the responsibilities of the elected officials and the city employees, and how public service is different from private enterprise.

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

**Mayor Welch:** It varied – one time it was a dancer, then a nun, then a lawyer...

**Mayor Presley:** A pharmacist, but seems a bit late for that degree now!

**Mayor James:** I wanted to be a lawyer because that is how I thought I could help people.

**Mayor Kolas:** A carpenter or draftsman.

### MOST PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED TO LEARN ...

**Mayor Welch:** I played the organ in church and sang and played daily masses in Latin. Sometimes the priest and I would see how fast we could do a mass! I played quite a few funerals but no one ever hired me to do their wedding!

**Mayor Presley:** That I was the mascot for Branson High School – a pirate, and that I am addicted ... to bubble gum!

**Mayor James:** I love to cook risotto!

**Mayor Kolas:** I played lead guitar and sang with a Country Western Band in the 1970s. □