

# 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 City Administrators and Managers to share what inspired them to serve in their community and other questions to provide a glimpse into their role as city leaders.*

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**Eric Johnson, Blue Springs**

**Keith Moody, Harrisonville**

**John Butz, Rolla**

**Dennis Gehrt, Platte City**

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## WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

**Johnson:** I began working in local government in 1986 in my hometown of Richmond, Missouri as a Parks and Recreation employee. I really liked the diversity of work assignments and enjoyed interacting with people throughout the community. Being exposed to various aspects of local government at an early age (i.e. management, law enforcement, parks, development, etc.) and working with so many positive people began to influence, and fine-tune my personal/professional development and education goals, ideas, and values. My time in Richmond was rewarding and helped define my future career in local government.

**Gehrt:** My initial interest in local government was sparked by my parent's active involvement in community organizations while I was growing up. Both parents were involved in local political party activities in a community in which city elections were contested on a partisan basis. As a very young person, I did not understand any of the issues but was very attracted by the energy and activity involved in the local election process which involved candidates who were friends and neighbors. Although I now have a much greater appreciation for the benefits of non-partisan local elections, I do miss some of the excitement and color surrounding local elections in a partisan community.

**Moody:** The impact that one person can have on an entire community, being part of decisions that will forever change lives, the culture and direction of the community.

## WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY?

**Gehrt:** Platte City residents were willing to make tough choices to improve their community. In the mid 1990s the community had an opportunity to either improve itself and take advantage of economic activity around Kansas City International Airport or to do nothing that would change the community in any way. Although change is always difficult and uncertain, Platte City residents voted in several elections to issue debt and increase tax revenue to rebuild the City's water, sewer, storm water, and street infrastructure.

The results of those tough decisions are evident throughout the community in outstanding quality of public infrastructure in every neighborhood, the strong state of city finances, the high quality of city services and the incredible growth in economic activity made possible by the infrastructure investments of the past 20 years.

**Butz:** I love that Rolla is a full-service community that blends the best attributes of a rural community with the amenities of a first-class university town.

## WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT MANAGING YOUR CITY?

**Johnson:** I can't imagine another career that provides the diversity of work and opportunity to influence positive change more than that of a city administrator. Ultimately, what I enjoy most is the ability to deliver initiatives and projects that enrich the lives of residents in our community. I can remember working for six years on a very large retail development project. There were many days when we thought the project would never manifest and when we finally had the ribbon cutting on the first store; it was like having a parade that the entire community attended. The feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction was unbelievable.

**Butz:** Working with the City Departments and employees in providing quality services for our citizens and visitors. So much of what we accomplished is truly due in large part to the partnerships we have with our schools, the Chamber, the County, key institutions and community organizations so we try to be a very outward-focused organization.

## WHAT ACCOMPLISHMENT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF FOR YOUR CITY?

**Johnson:** A few things come to mind. In 2009, we opened 600,000 square feet of new retail in a lifestyle/power center during one of the nations' most challenging economies. The retail development responded to a large demand from residents who desired to shop locally and keep sales tax dollars within their community. During 2011, our residents also showed great support for the City by passing a one-half cent sales tax (no sunset) dedicated for public safety. These funds are programmed for equipment and new technology, additional police personnel and improved public safety facilities. Passed during the nations' recession, the successful initiative further demonstrates our community's commitment and support for important local initiatives.

**Gehrt:** The accomplishment I am most proud of is that residents rarely have to think about their city government or city services. Most people would rather spend their time and energy focusing on their family, their faith and their work rather than having to worry municipal services or municipal issues. Platte City provides extremely high-quality services ranging from police to streets to utilities to parks and recreation. The City prides itself in providing this high level of basic services while maintaining reasonable tax and service fees and still making appropriate contributions to reserve and replacement funds.

**Moody:** Consolidation of ambulance and fire service into a 24/7 Emergency Services

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Department, as well as a culture that looks for the best way forward by considering our performance relative to peers and based on citizen input.

## WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE IN YOUR POSITION?

**Gehrt:** The major challenge I face is the constant struggle to balance immediate operational, administrative and community demands with the professional responsibility to assist the community and the elected officials to envision, plan and fund the future. Because local government tends to be a “what have you done for me lately” proposition, it is all too easy for to get pulled into issues that can and should be addressed and resolved at the department or community interface level. Encouraging and empowering staff at all levels to make service decisions frees me up to assist elected officials in focusing on longer range issues but it also takes a leap of faith to allow staff to take initiative and make substantive decisions.

**Butz:** The expectation of more services with less resources and the challenges that brings with keeping everyone on the same page.

## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A NEW CITY MANAGER / CITY ADMINISTRATOR, OR SOMEONE CONSIDERING THE FIELD?

**Johnson:** Two things: 1) Position yourself in an organization where you can learn budget and finance and 2) Find a mentor. When I finished my MPA, I had the opportunity to work for the city of Kansas City, Mo., for six years in the budget office. During that time, I was immersed into the world of Excel spreadsheets and policy development. I spent my days locked in a cubicle, but I learned about municipal finance and honed my skills as a financial/policy analyst. Manager’s must understand how budgets work and possess the skill set that allows them to blend policy goals with budget reality; more art than science. I would have been lost in my position had I not ‘cut my teeth’ in the budget office. Secondly, and perhaps the most import, is to find a mentor. I was very fortunate to work for Fred Siems. Fred, now retired, was the Blue Springs city administrator for 26 years and is a legend among Missouri city managers. He was time-tested and a proven leader/manager. It was his leadership, wisdom, patience,

and guidance that helped mold me into the administrator I am today.

**Butz:** Get ready for a crazy and remarkable ride. Everyday will bring new challenges and opportunities. Remain humble but work with conviction.

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

**Johnson:** I asked my 10-year-old son this question the other day. He said, “professional baseball player, fighter pilot, or City Manager.” There’s something not right with this picture.... I had similar thoughts when I was 10, except for the city manager part! When I began to cultivate the musician in me I, of course, wanted to become a rock star. Secretly, I’m still pursuing that dream...

**Gehrt:** I wanted to be a soldier. My father was a veteran of both World War II and the Korean War. As it turned out, my first career was as a Marine Corps infantry officer. The sense of duty, responsibility and purpose I learned in the Marine Corps proved to be excellent preparation for serving as a city manager or city administrator for the past 20 years.

**Butz:** Initially I wanted to work with animals – a vet or a zoologist (the latter because I thought the name sounded cool) as a teen I wanted to be a police officer and then headed to college I wanted to be a lawyer. Simultaneously, like many Catholic boys, I wanted to be a Priest. After 26 years in the profession, 27 years of marriage and 5 kids, I think I chose correctly!

**Moody:** I wanted to race motorcycles for a living. Turned out a need for speed does not equate to gainful employment.

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

**Johnson:** Although I sit behind a desk and enjoy my career in local government, that was not always the case. In high school I was not the college-bound kid. I was in vocational-technical school for two years as an auto-body technician. I learned how to work on cars and developed a fairly extensive mechanical skill set. To this day, I enjoy working on cars and have the ability to weld, paint, work with fiberglass, tear-down and rebuild engines, and do fairly extensive automotive restoration work; although I don’t have much time for it.

Two years ago I restored a 1985 Cobalt speed boat and spend time on Blue Springs Lake with family and friends. If the rock star gig doesn’t pan out for me, in retirement, I would consider opening a classic auto restoration shop. I even have a name, “Nostalgic Auto.”

**Gehrt:** That my wife and I raise, train and show reining horses, and that, until recently, much of my spare time was spent farming 200 acres for relaxation. Although I recently gave up leases on most of my hay ground and we have downsized our horse herd, my wife and I still have 15-20 head of horses at any one time.

**Butz:** I’m in a four-person acoustical band called “Trilogy”.

**Moody:** I enjoy restoring vintage motorcycles, love fast cars and motorcycle and relax by racing cars.

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

**Johnson:** Like many people, I am a Beatles fan and have enjoyed listening and playing their music since I was 10 years old. Therefore, Liverpool, England is on my travel list. A family trip, no doubt, with the opportunity to visit English castles, countryside, and traverse the historic English canal system (I believe it’s their equivalent of going on a south Missouri weekend float trip.)

**Gehrt:** I have been fortunate enough to travel and live in many parts of the United States as well as visiting more than 30 foreign countries, mainly during my military career. Although I have fond memories of virtually all those locations, including Afghanistan, the place I would most like to return is the coastal regions of Spain from Cadiz on the Atlantic east to Valencia in the Mediterranean. The people are extremely friendly and open, the landscape is stunning and the pace of life is many notches slower than in the US and most of other developed countries.

**Butz:** My lifetime goal was to travel to Germany where my grandfather lived. I did that in 2013. Now, my sights are sent on Rome - why? I'm still a faithful Catholic boy!

**Moody:** Any racetrack in a warm and sunny climate next to the water. The last three criteria are required in order to get my wife to come along. □