New vision sets the course for revitalization in Norwich

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NORWICH – In terms of progress, it’s been a shaky year for the City of Norwich. While the city continues to make headway on several multi-million dollar projects that have been years in the making, 2015 came to a close with new faces in city leadership, and a budget crisis that city officials agree left a sour taste in the mouths of taxpayers.

Undeniably, the story of the year at the city level took place in the late months of 2015, when city residents elected a new mayor to office and scorned the Common Council for years of heedless spending that all but depleted the city’s financial reserve, marking Norwich as a city susceptible to financial stress.

Even so, with cautionary spending and nose-to-the-grindstone work ethic, brighter days are ahead, assured newly elected Mayor Christine Carnrike.

“It’s a new year, a new mayor, and a renewed message where we embrace progress but never abandon the quality that made Norwich a great place to raise a family,” Carnrike said during her swearing-in ceremony held New Year’s Day.

Carnrike, a Republican and daughter of former Mayor George Carnrike Sr. (elected 1973), was favored among voters during the September primary elections. Running on a platform to “restore the Norwich community,” Carnrike trumped preceding Republican Mayor Joseph Maurano with 386 votes to Maurano’s 195.

But there was hardly time for a victory lap for Carnrike. In late September, a report released by the New York State Comptroller disclosed that the city’s fiscal stress score has worsened over the last year, sliding from 31.7 percent in 2013 to 49.2 percent in 2014.

The fiscal stress monitoring system, created by the Comptroller’s Office in 2013, is a statewide initiative to keep municipalities out of the red. The higher the score on a fiscal stress report, the more susceptible a municipality is to potentially devastating financial burdens. Scores are based on financial and environmental factors, including a municipality’s fund balance, operating deficit, debt, population, and poverty and unemployment rates.

The latest report targeted Norwich on three criteria, the most notable being a low fund balance (surplus) and three consecutive years of deficit spending.

“In a September interview with The Evening Sun, Carnrike said, “Something needs to change in vision and leadership for Norwich to return to what it used to be.”

“I worry about the future of the city if myself or someone else doesn’t step up for change,” she said. “When you have a new set of eyes, you may come up with a better solution. I may not have all the answers; but if given the opportunity, I will do everything I can.”

Unfortunately, issues for the city only worsened by the end of the year. Facing a possible

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

Best of Chenango:
Chenango Blues Fest: Looking ahead to another year of growth & success

C.J. Chenier and his Red Hot Louisiana Band perform under the stars during one of the Chenango Blues Fest/NBT Bank Summer Concert presentations in Norwich’s East Park in July 2014. The story appears on page 30.

Matthew White Photo
To work a balanced 2016 department, had many city layoffs, mainly in the fire service, between a rock and a hard place leading into the 2016 fiscal year. Talks of possible layoffs, mainly in the fire department, had many city residents up in arms over what many said was a lack of foresight on the city’s behalf.

Ultimately, members of the Common Council were able to avoid the 2016 budget with just a 5.4 percent increase without any layoffs.

Aflac

Jim Reynolds is beginning his 13th year as an independent agent with Aflac. He and his wife Rosemarie live in Norwich and have two children. Megan is a senior at Union College and Shane is a freshman at Ithaca College. Jim enjoys being involved with the community. He is an officer with the Lions Club of Norwich, participates in the annual Relay for Life, and is VP of Public Relations for the Preferred plumbers.

Aflac was founded in 1955 by 3 brothers in Columbus, Georgia. Today the same family owns the company. The core of Aflac’s success is its simple and unique business model: to sell supplemental insurance.

Reynolds says even the New York Times recently recognized this highly valued commodity.

For over 5 decades, Aflac’s signature product has been their cancer insurance. Fortune 500 Company, says cancer insurance can help ease the financial burden that comes with a cancer diagnosis by helping to address the gaps in major medical insurance.

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The groundwork was laid for a successful career when Reynolds worked as a sales manager for Aflac. He says the opportunity to meet with so many people, to use the power of the Aflac duck, by referencing the extremely popular TV commercials that almost everybody has seen in addition, being introduced himself as the “Aflac guy,” and Reynolds says “it struck a chord with me because most people don’t think of Aflac any more.” So Jim has been using that nickname ever since and having lots of fun with it as well.

The bulk of Aflac’s business is done through payroll programs. By offering Aflac insurance, employees will have the opportunity to pay less for insurance and receive more benefits. As an independent agent, Reynolds enjoys helping people and helping to meet their insurance needs.

Vinyl Flooring

Vinyl flooring is a popular choice for homeowners due to its durability and low maintenance. It comes in a wide range of colors and styles, making it versatile for any type of home. Vinyl flooring is also affordable compared to other flooring options, making it a cost-effective solution for those on a budget.

There is a chance that both the new water tank and water filtration plant could be operable later this year. The city also took a big step forward in exploring the possibility of using solar technology in 2015. The idea is to use solar energy to power municipal buildings throughout the city.

The city council passed a resolution in September, authorizing the mayor to begin negotiations with SolarCity, an energy service provider specializing in solar power technologies.
SolarCity was the low bidder on a Request for Proposal (RFP) sent out by the city back in May to design, build, finance, and provide a solar system to be utilized by the City of Norwich. The resolution further allowed the mayor to chase after grant funds offered through the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA). NYSERDA incentives would help offset costs of constructing a solar site and contracting with a private solar industry, such as SolarCity. Electricity generated at the solar site would go on the power grid, and the city would receive a credit for every watt that’s generated. That credit could then be used to lower costs of electricity on municipal buildings, including city hall, the Norwich Police Department, the city DPW, and the fire department.

In total, the city could save as much as $94,000 annually, according to estimates from SolarCity. Moreover, it would stabilize future energy supply costs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Details of the project are still in the works.

Developments are also being made on the Heritage Block project, an undertaking allowed the mayor to chase after grant funds offered through the New York State Office of Community Renewal awarded $250,000 for facade and building renovations; and another $120,000 was awarded through Empire State Development. The third and final grant, awarded through the NY Environmental Facilities Corporation, will be used for an overhaul of the Heritage Block shared parking lot which comprises Lackawanna Avenue on the south side with Mechanic Street on the north side. More than simply repaving the parking lot, the $534,000 grant will pay for green infrastructure that will prevent water runoff and allow rainwater to absorb into the ground.

All three grants were bundled in $904,000 grant package awarded to the City of Norwich in the fourth round of the Regional Economic Development Council in 2014. Grant application and administration fees paid to Shelter Planning will be taken from all three grants that were awarded.

When engineering plans are complete, the city will put the parking lot refurbishing project out to bid. Hopes are to start construction later this year. Many of the renovations to the buildings on North Broad Street on the north side with Lackawanna Avenue on the south side with Mechanic Street on the north side will go on the city’s financial position. Said Mayor Caruime, “Local government officials and residents will need to work collaboratively and innovatively at these municipal challenges in order to reverse the apparent neglect and condition of many of Norwich’s once proud neighborhoods as this is key to breathing vitality into Norwich.”

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NORWICH - “I have family and friends that come from all over, they drive from Syracuse and Binghamton, they are always amazed at the number of activities that fill Norwich though the year.” Those words from City of Norwich Business Improvement District (BID) President Roger Shackleton echoed off the red brick walls of historic City Hall. “They all comment on how much is going on in our little town.”

That might not be the case if it were not for the hard work and concerted efforts of the Norwich BID. In stark contrast from many downtowns of small rural communities - downtown Norwich has always been and continues to be an attractive and vibrant destination, thanks largely in part to the Norwich Business Improvement District (BID) that was established in 1986, a subsidiary of the former Norwich Business Improvement District Management Association, Inc. (BIDMA) and the former Norwich Commercial Association, Inc. (BIDMA), founded in 1982 - one of the first BID's in New York State. As a result, the BID has had a hand in just about every project and venture that has kept downtown Norwich alive and kicking through 2015.

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The Colonia Theater is a longstanding downtown Norwich staple and pride in history that resounds throughout the county. Tucked with developing programs aimed at spurring downtown foot traffic along the City of downtown Norwich sidewalks and parks, the BID essentially functions as a private sector organization, which enhances the safety, cleanliness, image and competitiveness within the confines of a defined downtown district. Throughout its 30 years of existence, the BID has had a hand in: the creation of a parking lot, various parking enhancements, streetscape improvements, and the implementation of various grant opportunities.

For downtown Norwich to reach its full potential, there must be a management vehicle that allows downtown’s key constituents and government officials to plan and work together and BID continued to meet that goal through 2015.

It would be hard to put a finger on a festival or downtown program that the BID has had a hand in. The Chenango Blues Fest, The Annual Pumpkin Festival, color-scape pool goes on and on. BID’s main function for some of these programs is to serve as the 503-C nonprofit “umbrella” that enables a tax-free nonprofit funding conduit for grant funding. According to Shackleton, the win-win logic is simple: Enrich downtown attendance by lending a collaborative hand to like-minded organizations, and reap the reward on the backside with increased revenue at the brick and mortar shops on main street.

“It really was quite some-thing,” said Shackleton. “There were guys painting and doing general maintenance and minor repairs to area businesses, weeds being pulled, and garbage being hauled - the turnout was pheno-nominal.”

Looking ahead to 2016, BID plans on sustaining the dozens of free events and events to downtown culture that has kept it the “go-to” committee in downtown on-gogings over the last three decades. Coe and Shackleton agree while that the art of bringing thousands of people into the district and promoting commerce for our merchants isn’t the easiest job in the county, should remain the focal point for the organization - as these events are the best way to engage community members and recruit your community to new visitors alike.

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NORWICH BID - A progressive approach to enhancing downtown health, quality of life and pride in history that resounds throughout the county. Tucked with developing programs aimed at spurring downtown foot traffic along the City of downtown Norwich sidewalks and parks, the BID essentially functions as a private sector organization, which enhances the safety, cleanliness, image and competitiveness within the confines of a defined downtown district. Throughout its 30 years of existence, BID has had a hand in: the creation of a parking lot, various parking enhancements, streetscape improvements, and the implementation of various grant opportunities. For downtown Norwich to reach its full potential, there must be a management vehicle that allows downtown’s key constituents and government officials to plan and work together and BID continued to meet that goal through 2015.

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“‘To us, it’s all about work- ing in conjunction with these programs to make them more successful, all in an effort to bring people into the downtown of our City,” said Shackleton. ‘From there’s it’s up to the individual organiz- ers to capitalize on that spike in foot traffic. But not only is the BID an intermediary conduit that promotes and organizes events that reach beyond a downtown district. BID both organizes and funds such annual affairs as the much revered Christmas tree Lighting ceremony, community-wide easter egg hunt, a classic car cruise-in which serves as the impromptu kick-off to summer-long activities in the both East and West Parks.”

“The BID is proud to be part of this,” said Coe, “and we’ll do everything we can to create an atmosphere that fos- ters this growth. Through our work, we produce the events that drive people to this area, increase the enjoyment for those who live here, and cause a positive shift in the perceptions of downtown.”

Much akin to The Chenango United Way’s Day of Caring, The BID has turned an eye on ‘Street Sweeps,’ a volunteer based action brigade that tackles a number of basic chores.

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