

Calhoun County Looking Forward 2015

For the Marshall Advisor & Chronicle

Kelli Scott, Administrator/Controller

As 2014 ends and the New Year begins, it is a good time to reflect on the past year's accomplishments and, at the same time, anticipate exciting plans for the future. Your county commissioners, judges and elected officials have made impressive strides during this last year, implementing many new initiatives and working well together with County Administration toward our commitment, as our letterhead states, to "building a better county through responsive leadership." Here are several reasons for our optimism looking forward:

Finances Are Improving

Standard & Poor's raised Calhoun County's bond credit rating from 'AA-' to 'AA'. Our rating is now only slightly behind the highest 'AAA' rating, and it means the county has a very strong capacity to meet our financial commitments. The County's 2015 General Fund budget is balanced at \$40 million and includes decreasing debt and increasing operating reserves. Because property taxes provide 45% of our operating revenues, we are most optimistic about seeing a rebound in real property values after five straight years of decline. Next year is expected to bring back fully funded state revenue sharing for counties—the first in a decade - and the stabilization of public safety revenues. Our budget does not require a millage rate increase to taxpayers for 2015 because of the structural budget balancing steps we've taken.

Public Safety Enhancements Continue

Through a collaborative agreement with the City of Battle Creek, a new law enforcement and jail records management system went live in 2014, allowing for the County Sheriff, Prosecutor and Courts along with the Battle Creek Police Department to share crime records, and thus increase citizen and officer safety. Through the Calhoun County Public Safety Alliance, any other local law enforcement agency can now participate with our shared system. A police to citizen "P2C" application will be launched soon, to provide convenient online access to public records regarding police incidents and jail inmates. Construction began during 2014 on the Marshall Regional Law Enforcement Center, which will open in 2015 and house law enforcement personnel from the Michigan State Police, Marshall Police Department and Calhoun County Sheriff's Office. And in 2014, the County Sheriff began providing contracted law enforcement services for Homer Village.

Public Private Health & Wellness Collaboration Growing

Our Care Here Employee Health & Wellness Center—Calhoun County's partnership with the City of Battle Creek and Toyota Tsusho of Battle Creek—opened in 2014 and continues to see tremendous success. Employee utilization has exceeded benchmarks and is increasing, saving hundreds of thousands of dollars per year in health care costs for the county and our employees. The partnership will expand in 2015, with two more local private employers joining the center and nearly doubling the number of employees and their dependents eligible for its access.

Parks & Recreation Opportunities Expanding

In 2014 the first segment of our new Calhoun County Trail way opened for free public use. Five miles of hiking and biking trails now connect our three primary County Parks—Ott Biological Preserve, Kimball Pines Park and Historic Bridge Park. Funded entirely with grants and private dollars, this project is a collaboration between the Calhoun County Trailway Alliance, the Friends of the Ott Preserve, and the County, which manages the parks through our new Community Development office. A draft of our 2015-

2019 Parks & Recreation Master Plan is now available at county offices or the County's website for public comment until Jan. 5.

Road Department Gearing up for 2015 Projects

The County Road Department's budget for 2015 totals \$25 million, which is more than double the 2014 budget. The budget includes significantly increased federal and state grant funding and matching dollars for a three-year plan to invest more than \$10 million in local road improvements in Pennfield and Bedford Townships, representing an unprecedented level of local funding to be committed within Calhoun County. Under new Road Department leadership, the County will continue to partner with Jackson County's Department of Transportation and our joint purchasing system and expect our savings from administrative costs and economies of scale to continue to grow into 2015 and beyond. Traveling motorists should see better snow clearing results this winter, due to shift scheduling and plow route changes, as well as new text messaging capabilities with school administrators and our developing partnership with the fleet managers at the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi's Tribal reservation.

Increasing Support for Veterans and Seniors

The County Veterans Affairs Office created a new strategic plan during 2014, outlining veterans' millage allocation plans and the expansion of programs to help the nearly 12,000 veterans living here. Our Office of Senior Services and Senior Millage Allocation Committee (SMAC) continues to ensure the best use of \$2.6 million in revenues dedicated to services for senior citizens, and in 2014 leveraged taxpayer dollars with a \$45,000 per year United Way grant to provide additional dental services to more older adults over the next three years.

Casino Revenue Sharing Grants, Round Two

During 2014, the FireKeepers Local Revenue Sharing Board (FLRSB) distributed more than \$5 million to local governments from the casino's 2% "net win" according to the State's compact with the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi (NHBP). The FLRSB also provided \$185,000 to 16 school programs and government projects within a discretionary grant program.

Becoming more Regionally Aligned

The newly formed Southcentral Michigan Planning Council (SMPC) completed a new five-county Regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) during 2014. We also regionalized our Workforce Development efforts this past year, forming a new Michigan Works! service area covering St. Joseph, Kalamazoo, Calhoun and Branch counties.

More Ways to Interact with County Government

The County welcomes public participation and input, and posts contact information, board agendas, videos and minutes, policies, dashboard indicators and financial information on our website, www.calhouncountymi.gov. The public can subscribe to free emergency and weather notifications through the county's website, which was switched to the Nixle application for 2015. County board meetings are aired on Access Vision channels and highlighted on local radio stations. Major technology initiatives are planned for 2015-2016 with a focus on streamlining government processes and more public access to services and records. We encourage everyone to find Calhoun County Government on Facebook, where our goal is to be "Liked" even more during 2015!

The November 2014 election resulted in two new County Commissioners for the 2015-16 term. The county is a better one because of the responsive leadership of our two outgoing commissioners—Art Kale (District 7, Board Chair from 2011-2014), and Commissioner Terris Todd (District 2)—and they deserve a huge collective thanks. We welcome incoming commissioners Carla Reynolds (District 2) and Mike Bearman (District 7), and look forward to their new ideas.