

STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

It has been a busy year for the County and I am proud to report that we continue to provide quality services and efficient resource management for the citizens and guests of Aitkin County.

Aitkin County Administrator Jessica Seibert was elected as an at-large member of the Minnesota Association of County Administrators (MACA), an organization whose goal it is to improve the administration of county government. She has had a busy year with the new building construction which is on schedule in spite of the continual rain days we experienced making parking and access a struggle. We look forward to the opening of the new government center sometime in early fall and thank staff and visitors for their continual willingness to endure the inconveniences with positive attitudes.

Cynthia Bennett, Aitkin County Health and Human Services Director attended the John Maxwell Train the Trainer Conference providing her leadership skills that are applied in our county on a daily basis. She has employed her new skills holding training sessions for county employees throughout the year. Her staff continues to build on previous successes promoting healthy lifestyles through the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) program including farm to table in both schools and businesses; developing new means to expand transportation assuring access to healthcare services; increasing services and support options for individuals struggling with mental health conditions and; increasing the number of foster care homes in our community to support our children in need. The mental health/CD team received a 100% compliance review from DHS showing staffs dedication to details and their job responsibilities.

Aitkin County Environmental Services Director, Terry Neff reports that Aitkin County obtained permitting for a yard waste composing site adjacent to the Oak Ridge Demolition Landfill. Recycling availability expanded from two hours every other Saturday to Monday through Thursday every other week in Hill City and Malmo and in McGrath to all day the second Wednesday of the month. At the electronic collection event held in June, over 36,000 pounds of materials were collected for recycling from 275 households at no cost to the resident. The Shoreland Management Ordinance was amended to allow patios as a second water oriented structure and standards were added to allow for permitted annual ice ridge reclamation, with some restrictions. Classes for certified food managers were taught and “Cooking for a Crowd” classes for faith based and non-profit organizations were held in Aitkin and Palisade with sixty participants. Anyone interested in testing their homes for Radon can obtain a free Radon Test Kit from the Aitkin County Environmental Services Department.

Aitkin County welcomes newly elected Sheriff, Dan Guida and newly appointed Under-Sheriff, Heidi Lenk. Both have many prior years of service with Aitkin County and we are comforted knowing we are in such good hands.

The Aitkin County Land Department (ACLD) continues to excel in managing our natural resources under the direction of newly appointed Land Commissioner, Rich Coutemanche. Retirees, Mark Jacobs, having worked thirty-eight (38) years and Cathy Buhlman, having worked twenty-six (26) years in the Land Department built a strong platform to expand upon. ACLD celebrated twenty (20) years of FSC Certification holding the honor of the oldest continually certified public agency in North America. Aitkin County received Legislative approval for 1.5 million dollars to expand out ATV trail system and a \$24,000 grant to improve pollinator habitat. In response to the devastating 2016 blowdown event, approximately 233,000 trees were planted utilizing LiDAR and new soil database tools to ensure planting was conducted in the most ecologically appropriate areas. ACLD also hosted the National Advanced Silvicultural Program, Birds and Forestry, and the Climate Change Adaptation Workshop throughout the year.

Ross Wagner, Economic Development Director, has secured a Blandin Broadband Grant in the amount of \$50,000 in addition to the already received \$75,000 which was utilized to expand Broadband on school buses and afford residents hotspots throughout the county. He promoted Aitkin County at the 49th Annual Sports Show handing out information on Long Lake Conservation Center, the Northwoods ATV and snowmobiling trails, local camping sites and activities provided throughout the county.

Our Veterans Service Officer, Penny Harms, reports the number of Veterans living in Aitkin County in 2017 was approximately 1820 - down 184 from 2016; that there were 670 office visits in 2018 and 180 outreach visits in McGregor, Hill City, Malmo and home visits, twice the number from 2017 due to the outreach locations established in McGregor, Hill City and Malmo; 131 new clients, an increase of 24% from 2017; and a 95% success rate for positive outcomes on claims filed from the office. The total Federal VA dollars coming directly to veterans in Aitkin County was \$8,282,000, more than double the amount from 10 years ago.

Mike Dangers, Aitkin County Assessor, reports that the County Assessor's Office is moving forward this year with new technology implementing the Mobile Assessor Program from Data Cloud Solutions. This program will help the appraisal staff update information from their iPads anywhere in the County, even without a wireless connection.

John Welle, Aitkin County Engineer and the Road and Bridge Department staff have had a busy start to the year keeping our roads and bridges clear from winter's continual deluge of snow, wind and rain. We thank them for the tireless hours they work to ensure our safety and accessibility to services.

Community Corrections Director Kameron Genz and staff continue to employ evidence best-practices in their efforts to rehabilitate probationers. The Minnesota Department of Correction (DOC) has approved their two-year Community Corrections Plan and expressed appreciation for the hard work and willingness Aitkin County Community Corrections has employed in its development.

Aitkin County ROW officers, Treasurer, Lori Grams, Recorder, Mick Moriarty and Auditor, Kirk Peyser were all re-elected this past election and continue to provide quality services to the County and its citizens with the aid of their dedicated and experienced staff.

It is because of the dedication of department heads and staff that I can report, the State of County is in good hands and being well managed. To a great 2019!