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Path to growth: Focus on Hammond Square, airport, recreation facilities

By Heidi Rogers Kinchen

Hammond's biggest accomplishments in 2009 were those that put the city on the path to future growth and development, city officials said.

Among those accomplishments were the opening of Hammond Square, development at the airport, expansion of recreational facilities, master planning efforts and continued improvements to the city's infrastructure and services.

Hammond Square

"If you're looking at accomplishments, you have to look at and focus on Hammond Square," said Mayor Mayson Foster. "Hammond Square has been very important for us, the crown jewel of our efforts."

City Councilman Mike Williams agreed.

"In a time when the rest of the country's economic development is stalled, postponed or even canceled, we were able to finish the project and create jobs while the rest of the country faced record unemployment," Williams said. "So completing Hammond Square definitely ranks up there very highly."

Foster said opening Hammond Square was key to the city's economic outlook.

"We knew we had to do something to establish a sales tax base for the city, and we knew Hammond Square had to be the focus of that," Foster said.

The shopping center's opening did not create direct conflict with existing businesses, but some are suffering due to the economy, he said.

"Some have been having challenges even before Hammond Square opened, so I don't want to say they're not having challenges, but I don't think it's a direct conflict with Hammond Square," Foster said.

"The entire focus of our 'Shop Local' campaign was not to get people to shop at Hammond Square but to get them to shop locally," he said. "People thought the same thing when Walmart came in, that it would put a lot of people out of business. And several did go out of business, but it was because they couldn't compete with the prices. But the stores we're talking about have a niche they can offer on their own and customer service, and that's what will keep them going and make them successful."

Foster said store owners must also compare their offerings to their market.



RECREATION EXPANSION — A sign advertises construction of an addition to the Michael J. Kenney Recreation Center, high on the city's list of accomplishments for the year. The \$80,000 community block grant the city received to expand the center was the largest the city received this year. Photo by Joan Davis

“Many stores must look at their product mix and adjust based on the customer base,” he said. “I have seen some that have come in with very high-priced merchandise, which realistically is not going to sell in the Hammond market. Some of those stores have adjusted accordingly and are doing well now.”

Although the city’s monthly sales tax collections have been below budget three times this fiscal year, the mayor said he expects holiday shopping to increase revenues going into 2010.

“November and December collections are normally huge because of the Christmas holidays,” he said. “A lot of people have done what we requested and shopped at home in Hammond and bolstered sales taxes. So I think we will see a good November and a very good December when we get the figures in February.”

Foster said he’s going to keep a very close eye on those numbers, though, in case adjustments to the city’s departmental expenditures are needed.

“We’ll be having a TEAM Hammond meeting in January, and I will be getting reports from the department heads on where each department is in terms of budget expenditures,” Foster said. “If any of them are out of line, I will ask the department heads that show overages that they have to be on budget for the end of the fiscal year at June 30.”

Airport development

“The continued growth and development of the airport is a very good sign of how strong we are financially,” Williams said. “Any city with an airport has advantages. That the National Guard and Border Patrol are spending money there says a lot for our city.”

The military’s move into the Hammond Northshore Regional Airport is important for the city’s future as well, Foster said.

“We’ve developed a great partnership there, and it does establish a great basis for the future,” he said.

Looking to the future, city officials are working with the National Guard to develop an air traffic control tower.

The tower would increase safety and, as a result, increase traffic flow through the airport, said Airport Director Jason Ball.

“The National Guard has agreed to equip the tower and provide the personnel required to run the tower,” Foster said. “Our responsibility is to provide the structure. We have put an estimate of \$1 million for the tower and are finding it very difficult to get it completed for that amount. We’ve received estimates of \$1.3 million to \$2.4 million, so right now we are still looking at ways to just do a basic structure.”

City officials have approached the Federal Aviation Administration about selling 19 acres of city-owned property at the corner of Shelton and Industrial Park roads, Foster said.

The land was acquired through the Government Surplus Act of 1945, and at one time served as an approach zone for a runway that is no longer in use, he said.

The FAA has given the city information on the requirements and process for getting an appraisal done in anticipation of a possible sale.

“We think it will sell for about \$750,000 to \$800,000, which would be a majority of the funding required for the tower,” Foster said. “The Guard is ready to move forward with the project, so the ball is now in our court.”

Expansion of recreational facilities

The \$800,000 community block grant Hammond received to expand the Michael J. Kenney Recreation Center

was the largest grant the city received this year, and one of the most important, Foster said.

Construction on the 10,305-square-foot expansion, which was designed to house senior programs, basketball events, a gymnastics program and a dancing program, began in April and is scheduled for completion in January.

But expansion of the city's recreational facilities will not end there, Foster said.

"I can tell you one of the areas that has bothered me is the lack of recreational facilities for our citizens," he said. "Ponchatoula has done an outstanding job in their recreation district. The city of Hammond probably, by itself, can never meet that. So we're looking for a partnership with the recreation district, and I think the city has a need to acquire at least some land for development of a recreational facility."

"Jason Hood, the new council president, and I have been looking at several different parcels that could be used for recreational facilities," Foster said. "We would require a minimum of 75 acres up to 150, depending on the property itself."

One area under consideration is in the I-12 business park, for which the Hammond Area Economic and Industrial Development District recently sold its partnership interest back to private developer Ed Hoover.

The mayor said he has spoken with Hoover about the property and has also looked into properties elsewhere around town.

"I believe the city of Hammond, at this point in time, can afford to purchase property, and I think within the first quarter of 2010, we will have one identified and will approach the council," he said. "We currently have about \$1.7 million in bond money that is available, as well as some funding remaining in the sales tax bond fund that can be used for this purpose."

Councilman Johnny Blount agreed the city needs more recreational facilities.

"One of my goals for 2010 is to make sure Hammond gets more recreation," he said. "We need to come above and get more soccer teams or something because, recreation-wise, I think we're way behind. One of my goals is to give these young folks something to do besides get in trouble."

Master planning efforts

Hammond began a master planning process in November, with a public design charrette held during the first week of December.

"The consultants from Dover, Kohl & Partners spent a week gathering information, and they'll be coming up with a plan to submit to the city probably in the latter part of April," Foster said.

The design group will present work-in-progress chapters as they are developed, but the mayor said he's looking forward to seeing the plan presented as a whole.

"They'll probably send draft chapters as they move along, but I want to look at an overall comprehensive plan because chapter 1 may affect chapter 3 or chapter 7, and I want to see it as a total product, not piecemeal."

Part of the planning process will include an examination of the way the city's zoning ordinances are structured, comparing Hammond's land use-based codes to a "smart growth" concept that uses form-based, design-oriented codes, he said.

"That was one of the reasons we went into the plan," Foster said. "One of the things we asked was for them to define their experience in form-based usage and planning. There was a lot of discussion in the planning process about smart growth versus what we're doing now, which is basically zoning."

"Some people will grasp the concept of putting more people in a smaller area with all the facilities they need

within walking distance, whereas others will want large green spaces,” he said. “And while it might perhaps reduce the size of each green space to do it that way, it would make us do more planned development so that we grow in a smarter way.”

Williams said the master plan will be important for the city’s growth and how it will look in the future, especially around the edges.

“It’s still one of my goals to annex University Avenue west of Morrison, all the way to I-55, and some stuff came to light in the master planning process that supports annexing that area,” he said. “We should be able to control growth and how it looks because that’s a major entrance to the city and to the university, and it’s a shame we don’t have any say on how it’s developed.”

But annexation is a complicated process, Williams said.

“You need 51 percent of the property owners and registered voters, and that has been a challenge,” he said. “We had to seek, and received, permission for the voting rolls to be purged, and it’s something we’ll continue to work on in 2010.”

Infrastructure and services

Stabilizing the south plant sewer treatment facility, completing a force main for northeast Hammond and beginning work on the west side, continuing drainage work and passing a new stormwater ordinance were just a few of the many infrastructure projects Hammond worked on in 2009.

Regarding waste water treatment, the city has consistently met all the Department of Environmental Quality limits for the last 10 weeks, Foster said.

“For the first time since installation, we are now meeting all those limits on a consistent basis,” he said. “That doesn’t mean we can let our guard down. We have to keep working forever to keep it stabilized. But meeting those standards for the last 10 consecutive weeks is a huge accomplishment.”

Completing a force main that would direct water flow straight to the headworks, rather than through a substation, has also improved city services, the mayor said.

“It alleviated a major problem in the northeast section of town,” Foster said. “When there was a heavy rain, the pump station was overflowing on a regular basis, and although it was not a health issue, it was certainly uncomfortable for the neighbors. That’s been fixed now.”

Blount said that was the city’s biggest accomplishment for his district members.

“With the odor and overflow, it had been a problem for me and my district,” Blount said. “The sewer treatment project didn’t go as fast as I thought it could have. I had a lot of complaints about it, but it’s been fixed now and that was the city’s biggest accomplishment for my district.”

Hood said drainage may not be a chic or fun subject, but it’s necessary work in which the city has made progress.

“It’s not real fun to talk about, but we did get a lot of drainage work done,” he said. “My goal every year is to get as many drainage ditches covered as possible. We didn’t get a whole lot of that accomplished this year, but we’re going to try to do more next year.”

Foster said the city’s drainage improvements for the year did make a marked difference, though.

“Our work is shown by the fact that we had 10 to 12 inches of rain and no major flooding in the city of Hammond,” he said.

Street improvements were also among the city’s infrastructure accomplishments for the year, with the Chauvin

Drive reroute of Old Baton Rouge Highway and preliminary work on the U.S. 51 Business roundabouts at I-12 and Club Deluxe Road topping the list, officials said.

“We also got a new garbage company and curbside recycling,” Hood said. “A lot of people are happy about that.”

“We are so excited to be able to provide recycling services and solid waste disposal for a reduced price,” Foster said. “I’m not a real environmental person, I have to admit, but I’m finding myself every day putting stuff in my recycling bin, and it’s already overflowing. So I think it will be a huge success for The Recycling Foundation of Baton Rouge and for the citizens, as well as the environment in general.”