

Times-Republican

Local leaders optimistic about 2022



T-R PHOTO BY ROBERT MAHARRY Developing the downtown area is one of the top shared priorities among local leaders in Marshalltown heading into 2022.

Although 2021 was supposed to be the year when COVID-19 and the pandemic became a thing of the past, that certainly wasn't the case either in Marshalltown or around the world. Once again, the virus dominated the headlines and the general narrative surrounding the year, and it's hard to believe it will magically disappear anytime soon.

Nonetheless, local leaders are choosing to look forward with a sense of optimism and renewed purpose, and several of them shared their visions for 2022 and beyond in a series of recent interviews with the Times-Republican.

Downtown development a key priority for 2022

After his first five months as the Marshalltown Chamber of Commerce CEO, John Hall said that Marshalltown is exactly what he was led to believe it was during the interview process — a community with strong leadership that wants to see it become more than it is.

“That’s why I’m here. I’m not here to maintain the status quo. I’m here to push envelopes and figure out how we make really big things happen,” Hall said. “Because we want to be more than we were yesterday, and we’re going to continue to push that direction.”

Within his first days in Marshalltown, Hall laid out a goal to nearly double the town’s population to 50,000 by 2030. In 2022, Hall expects the kickstart to downtown redevelopment to be a pertinent factor in this larger goal, creating an environment for more housing and bringing in new business.

With a \$500,000 grant from the Iowa Economic Development authority, 11 downtown businesses will have their facades redone.

“That will be transformational in the outward appearance of our buildings, so I cannot understate how crucial that will be for changing

the narrative and making things look tremendously better,” Hall said.

Mayor Joel Greer has been a key advocate for the downtown development plan and hopes to see it executed beginning on State Street in 2022. As he begins his second term in the office, he will also seek to repair or raze buildings damaged by the recent storms.

“The biggest opportunities and challenges in 2022 and beyond are continuing to increase both housing stock and commercial and retail space to grow our population and stem the in-commuting,” Greer said. “My personal resolutions for the city are to continue to embrace diversity, to improve the level of discourse and civility in local and other politics, and to improve quality of life for residents with more recreational and shopping opportunities.”

Hall points to other projects from Joe and Janelle Carter, who are investing to develop 14 upper story housing units in the Willard’s building and attract new business to the lower level. The Carter’s also received a \$100,000 Main Street Iowa Grant to revitalize the adjacent Hopkins building.

“We’re going to start seeing some of those buildings come online, which is great because we really don’t have store frontage if people are wanting to do cool things downtown,” he said.

Part of the reconstruction effort still remains in a deconstruction phase as Hall said getting those final buildings down in 2022 will clear the way to attract developers to do the work Marshalltown is looking for. He hopes the clearing of those buildings sets the stage for construction projects in 2023.

As City Administrator Jessica Kinser noted, the plan is to demolish at least six buildings in the downtown area, which will hopefully pave the

way for rebuilding on those sites at some point in the future.

“Removing those painful reminders of what we have been through will hopefully produce positive feelings about Marshalltown and our next phase,” Kinser said.

Kinser is also excited about developments that should come to fruition in 2022 like the new McFarland and UnityPoint Health facilities and the reopening of the Marshalltown Arts and Civic Center (MACC).

Hall said beautification efforts like the facade projects and public art efforts from the Marshall County Arts and Culture Alliance have proven to be investments with direct results.

Hall looks to Pella as an example where the city chose to go for a big transformation that resulted in a downtown that has full storefronts and full of vibrant businesses. Because their buildings looked attractive, people wanted to open businesses, which resulted in significant tourism and local shopping.

“The idea that facades, or public art, won’t matter, and it’s just superficial is just a way for folks to, I guess, feel like they’re taking a stand against spending on something that isn’t the end product,” he said. “But boy, does it change the conversation happening in a community when it looks nice.”

Hall looks at a handful of spaces downtown and considers a need for a boutique hotel that could house conferences, yet has 60 to 80 rooms. He’s inspired by what Muscatine did with its hotel on the riverfront and considers it one of the best in the country.

“We’re going to need a pretty substantial investment downtown. We’re going to have some blank sites available to do something like that,” he said. “It’s finding ways to draw out those investors who have the same

shared vision that we do for what our community can be.”

Between the building demolitions, State Street reconstruction and various community cleanup initiatives, First Ward Councilor Mike Ladehoff predicts that 2022 will be a year of “rapid change.”

“Our budget will again be tight, with many more ideas and projects that we are able to fund, but that’s the way city budgets usually are,” Ladehoff said. “As for myself, I’m looking forward to 2022. Hopefully, we can put COVID-19 in the rearview mirror. I look to eat a little healthier, laugh a little more and continue to make Marshalltown a place to be proud of.”

The city council is welcoming three new members — Jeff Schneider, Barry Kell and Dex Walker — at the beginning of 2022, and all of them expressed support for the development initiatives during their campaigns.

Growth, growth, growth

If Marshalltown is going to grow the way Hall and others want it to, it’s going to require a convergence of several factors — affordable and available housing, world class education, recreational and retail opportunities and a development friendly business climate, to name a few.

With the new downtown apartments from the Carters and the State Street rebuild, Hall points to another facet in long term goals carrying over from 2021 to 2022, which is creating more housing, and in turn growing Marshalltown’s population.

When he arrived in August, Hall highlighted a \$10,000 credit for residents building a home with a value of \$180,000 or more. To this point, no one has taken up the offer, but Hall says there weren’t any

marketing dollars spent in 2021. That will change early in 2022.

“Our main push towards that effort is going to begin shortly after the first of the year with some targeted marketing efforts to drum up interest in the program,” he said.

Hall said that projects like Crosby Park are evidence that there is a demand and market for higher value housing at least on the rental side.

“We know that if speculative housing goes up, it typically sells before it is finished being constructed,” he said.

The challenge is there aren't a lot of speculative homes going up right now. Simultaneously, buyers will purchase brand new homes if they're on the market, but they're less willing to go through the effort of building their own homes from scratch.

Hall said Marshalltown is an interesting spot to be in where the builders needed are primarily located elsewhere — Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Ames or Cedar Falls. He said programs to draw those people into investing here will help.

“We know that this is a good market, and there's opportunity here. We just need to make that case,” he said.

Even with \$10,000 towards a new home, designing and making all the selections for a house is a lot of work. Not everyone is ready financially to build a property that exceeds \$180,000, but Hall says those investments are what's needed to create housing opportunities for other families.

“Our hope is to attract new people to live in the community, but not all the housing we construct will be new people moving in,” he said. “It may be people who've always lived here saying, ‘It's time to go up to

something bigger, something better, which opens up affordable housing stock to others.”

Keeping young people in town buying and building homes and connecting them to a thriving job market as they return from college is a continued effort that connects the Chamber of Commerce and the school system.

Marshalltown Community School District (MCSD) Superintendent Theron Schutte is focused on helping students graduate at a rate of 90 percent or higher while positioning themselves for post-secondary success attending college in the workforce, vocational schools, the military or gaining certification.

“My hope is that we can continue to collaborate with our local business partners to create meaningful work-based learning experiences for our students to help guide them toward their future job and career goals,” Schutte said.

Utilizing dual credit opportunities through the partnership with Marshalltown Community College, JBS Better Future scholarships, Marshalltown Education Partnership and Iowa State University Science Bound scholarships can help ease the barriers students face in pursuing further education.

“We need to continue to strive toward at least 70 percent of our students aspiring toward some form of Future Ready post-secondary attainment in order to best ensure all students are well positioned for livable wage jobs and careers that they’ll enjoy performing,” he said.

Schutte said the state legislature will have to “put their money where their mouth is” in order to move schools forward and back up the claim that Iowa has the best education in the nation.

“In the past couple decades, the state legislature has provided minimal State Supplemental Aid (SSA) increases for school districts that have afforded average compensation comparatively, which has apparently been the goal. And to expect our best and brightest graduates to aspire to average paying careers is counterproductive,” he said.

Teaching positions are in high demand and hard to fill. Schutte said creative incentives need to be implemented — beyond simply compensation — to alter a challenging trajectory.

A high workforce demand that is stretched among too few applicants is a challenge that Marshalltown faces as a whole. Hall said many have adapted their lifestyles based on what transpired with COVID, and previously dual income families may have ended up with someone staying home. The challenges have created a “cliff” as more people retire than enter the workforce.

“We’ve hit that cliff, we’ve driven off that cliff and there’s really no coming back from it,” he said. “We just have to think differently about the way we employ people.”

Hall looks towards technology and programs like Center for Industrial Research and Service (CIRAS) at Iowa State and a fourth wave of Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0) as answers to balance a shrinking workforce.

“I think for a long, long time, the word automation has been a dirty word,” he said. “It’s a ‘job killer,’ but the reality of it is there are more employment opportunities available right now than people looking for work.”

He said he doesn’t know of any employers that have added automation and eliminated jobs. It may eliminate roles, but the jobs end up

becoming higher skilled with training to maintain and service the technology.

“I’m bullish about the automation, the robots, the cobots and what they can mean for our business community. So, connecting them to tools and resources is what it’s all about,” Hall said.

Hall and Superintendent Schutte share the common goal of retaining Marshalltown graduates through meaningful employment in Marshalltown, and bringing them back after they go to college to keep the population moving upward with upward mobility.

Hall is encouraged to see Marshalltown employers step up and pay their workers a higher wage. He said that businesses struggling to find the help they need may need to change their way of thinking about how they frame their job positions-and pay more.

“That’s not going to be comfortable for a lot of people, but the reality is that there’s not people just waiting on the sideline,” he said. “It’s not for lack of people wanting to work, which is something we hear routinely, and is frankly a misnomer.”

Hall said there are other efforts like a recently announced program to make Marshalltown a Home Base Iowa Community to bring veterans leaving the military to the community as well as trying to engage in Afgan relocation and making Marshalltown a resettlement location.

As birth rates continue to drop across the state and the nation, the rates of people choosing to not have kids is rising.

“Yes, the birth rates are down. Yes, that’s a challenge nationwide. I’d say we are in a better position than the rest of the state based on our non-white population that continues to have stronger birthrates than, comparably, the white population,” Hall said.

Hall believes strongly that Marshalltown's opportunities for natural population growth exist firmly in populations who choose to live here.

"There's something incredibly valuable about folks who choose Marshalltown versus folks where families have lived here for a long, long time," he said.

A continuing MPACT

Youth Shelter Services (YSS) has been in Marshalltown 36 years, where David Hicks has been employed for 25 years and director for 15. Hicks said 2021 was the organization's best year ever. A partnership with the Marshalltown Police Department (MPD) was a driving factor and has been renewed to continue into 2022.

The development of MPACT (Marshalltown Police and Community Team) puts social workers alongside police officers for intervention efforts in helping Marshalltown residents in crisis. He said the program has exceeded expectations.

"I think we were really able to pivot and meet the needs of the community, but also just emerging needs," Hicks said.

The city funded \$150,000 for MPACT, which started on Jan. 1, 2021. After training, the advocates were in police cars responding to calls by Feb. 1. The \$400,000 awarded by the city will extend the program through 2026.

"A lot of people experiencing mental health issues, instead of calling the police or going to the ER, now we're working with them," he said. "We're saving (the) time and money of law enforcement, time and money preventing them going to the ER for an emotional or behavioral health issue. So, we're saving money, time and lives."

From February through November, MPACT advocates responded to 327 calls and had 475 contacts. Forty percent are mental health related, and other common reasons for the calls include homelessness, family conflict, preventing kids from getting involved with court, welfare checks and suicide prevention.

Marshalltown Police Chief Mike Tupper has embraced MPACT enthusiastically and considers it a boon to his department, allowing MPD officers to focus on more pressing matters at hand.

“We are trying to divert people from the criminal justice system by providing timely crisis and social services with case management, so people can obtain the help they need before a crime occurs or before a problem spirals out of control,” Tupper said. “This is a win for our community and a win for law enforcement because we can assign police resources to more traditional law enforcement tasks and provide social service resources to people as they need them. This project has been embraced by the community, so I feel like they understand the importance.”

Tupper sees MPACT as one piece of a larger equation showing how police departments can adapt to modern demands, build strong community relationships and continue to hire great officers as the department hopes to be fully staffed with 42 officers in 2022. Three recently hired officers will spend most of 2022 in training, and one retirement is anticipated.

“We will work with city leadership and elected officials to find ways to attract the best police officer applicants and to keep the rock star professionals we have working within our ranks,” he said.

The first MPACT client was a teenager having conflicts at home. After the police were called, they were able to avoid the legal route through

the partnership getting the teen involved with therapy, which she has continued.

“She’s really turned her life around, is much improved, back in school, has goals, and really sees the benefit of therapy, but most importantly, (she’s) rebuilding the relationship with her parents knowing there are supports out there and not seeing the police as the enemy or someone that’s there to get her in trouble,” Hicks said.

Early success stories like this helped to encourage the efforts as Hicks said there was pressure in turning an idea into a new pilot program.

“(Asking for) \$150,000 to start an idea...that was tough. That kept me awake for many, many nights trying to figure out ‘How will this look?’” he asked.

Hicks started with the outcomes first and thought about how things could be different as 2021 came to an end.

“We can reduce law enforcement time spent on non-criminal activities. We’ve done that. We wanted to reduce repeated and unnecessary trips to the ER. We’ve done that. We wanted the police to be fully invested, and over 90 percent (of officers) want to continue with MPACT and over 80 percent felt MPACT was a benefit to them on their shift,” he said. “The number one complaint from law enforcement is we need more people and more hours.”

Hicks said the City Council took a leap of faith when they presented their concept and were able to turn it into practice.

“We came up with an idea and they believed in us. No doubt they believed in Chief Tupper,” he said. “It comes from the leadership of Chief Tupper and on down.”

Hicks said he doesn't know any other job that is under as much scrutiny or requires the people who do it to wear video audio equipment that records their every move.

“Having MPACT to support the officers and realize they don't have to take on every call they get (has been huge). We just had them doing too much,” he said.

Police leadership acknowledging the benefit of social services relieves officers of having to deal with mental health and substance abuse issues where there's not necessarily a crime being committed, but social service needs are still present. This frees up law enforcement to deal with the criminal element as opposed to situations that burden their time.

Hicks said officers often had to go to the same house repeatedly to address a mental health issue, and unfortunately, it usually leads to an arrest and someone being taken away, which he says is not a solution.

“Sometimes, it just takes a different set of eyes and ears when dealing with a mental health issue,” he said. “Unfortunately, when someone comes into a room or a home, and they've got a badge and a gun, it just sets up an adversarial situation.”

Hicks said new programs have blossomed because of MPACT — for example, adding mental health therapists to meet the rising tide of those experiencing anxiety and depression, more in-home and in-office counseling, and medication management, which is something completely new for YSS.

YSS works with people of all ages, from young children to couples in need of marriage counseling to the senior population. Therapists can see the insured or the underinsured, and there are multiple grant programs to provide no-cost services for specialized populations like kids who've

aged out of foster care and the homeless.

“MPACT showed what always existed. There’s always been a homeless issue as most communities experience, but MPACT helped us reach them more quickly and provided a quick hand-off from that police encounter to us getting help,” Hicks said.

Hicks said there will be a more accurate view of Marshalltown’s homeless population in a few weeks when they do a “point in time homeless count.” YSS has worked with people who’ve slept outside of bars, families who tent at Riverview Park and the hidden homeless who are sleeping on floors or in basements.

“Police would respond to someone who is homeless. For example, they may be sleeping outside of a bar and the police would just kind of be left to case manage that person, and that’s not really in the realm of what the police do,” he said. “So, they’re able to hand them off to us, and we’ve been able to find housing for people.”

Not having a homeless shelter is a continuing challenge heading into 2022. YSS is able to put pieces together for getting someone housed, but it isn’t a long term solution. As Hicks puts it, there aren’t always easy answers.

Hicks often reminds the advocates they can’t wave a magic wand and solve all the issues, but they are able to uncover them and start to chip away at solutions.

“Quite frankly, we aren’t the ‘be all, end all.’ There are problems we can’t solve,” he said. “We can connect to resources, but we need to have people willing to change what’s going on, willing to acknowledge what they’re doing isn’t working, and change their heart.”

In order to succeed, YSS needs community support and financial

assistance on everything from fueling their vehicles to buying people tents so they can camp in someone's yard. They don't have a slush fund, so it takes dollars to provide help.

Relationships with business owners in Marshalltown have been key to MPACT's success and changing the course for the workforce.

"We are working with major employers and would love to see them step up and say, 'Yes, no doubt you've encountered our employees and prevented some from going to jail or hospital, and you've provided support so they could go to work the next day,'" Hicks said.

The process of MPACT is from "warm hand-off to warm hand-off." Advocates go out and engage with a family or individual, and they acknowledge and say yes to a need for services. They are then connected to a therapist at YSS and scheduled within a week or so, oftentimes less.

Hicks said that while not every situation is the same, there is a network available to help collaboratively.

"This isn't just for the person who has ongoing mental illness. We've worked with an elderly person who took a phone call and was duped out of her savings. She went to the police to report it and was completely distraught, so we worked through that and built supports around her," he said. "It's probably a one time incident, but you never know when someone is going to have something happen to them where they need access to social services where the police can only do so much. So we take the baton and move that forward."

Hick looks forward to continued success and growth in serving families in 2022 through MPACT and expanded programs with YSS, and is happily celebrating a year he won't soon forget.

"So, in many respects, I think 2021 was probably our finest hour," he

said. “Looking back 25 years, I don’t recall a better year for us.”

Public health challenges still looming

Through the challenges of 2020 and 2021, Marshall County Public Health Director Pat Thompson looks at 2022 with optimism as she feels Marshall County has the experience and people to take on adversity and weather storms.

“We have weathered storms and proven we can get back up on our feet and start all over again, so I think Marshall County knows how to do that,” Thompson said. “We all say we don’t like change, but I don’t think we give ourselves enough credit, because we’re pretty good at it. It may not be easy or what we want at the moment but we go through it and make it all work. ”

Her resolution is to encourage Marshall County residents to use masks and to become vaccinated, but also to focus on personal health in a broader sense.

“It’s taking good care of yourself both mentally and physically. It’s easy to put on the back burner with our very busy lives. Because you realize as you’re 10 years older, you wished you had kept that stuff up,” she said.

Greer, rather controversially, continued to impose a citywide mask mandate, which he conceded was largely unenforceable, until May 18, when Gov. Kim Reynolds signed a law banning the mandates in cities, counties and school districts. He still sees COVID as a “major concern” headed into 2022, especially considering the presence of the Iowa Veterans Home (IVH), large manufacturing and processing plants and other large nursing homes within Marshalltown.

Schutte is another local leader who has been tasked with making

difficult COVID-related decisions, and he didn't mince words in lamenting how divisive the situation has become — specifically citing the fact that one out of every 100 U.S. citizens over the age of 65 have died as a result of the pandemic.

“I'd give anything for another day, week, month and year to spend with either of my parents who passed away two decades ago. Why do so many people seem not to care about the potential deadly ramifications of our actions for our elders who laid the foundation for our families, communities and country?” Schutte asked. “It is my hope that our country's citizens will begin putting others' health, safety and wellbeing first without complaining about what simple inconveniences it may create to do so.”

For Thompson, a resolution at the top of her list is for people to invest in their relationships with each other and resolve to keep in touch and stay in touch.

“Find those places that bring you joy and renew those friendships that may have been pushed back a little bit. It's easier to not take care of relationships than it is to take care of them,” she said. “I have relationships that involve distance and we see each other twice a year but we resolve but we resolve to do that even though it's easier not to.”

She looks forward to three weddings in the summer and hopes to be able to take a much needed vacation next fall if it's possible.

Thompson has also missed meeting with her colleagues and sharing experiences in person at conferences, and the collaborative relationships she's built over her career at a county and state level.

Her job as Public Health Director over 15 years has provided a range of duties depending on the day. She has worked with on child abuse

prevention services, emergency preparedness, grant preparation and meeting with service organizations like the Kiwanis and Lion's Club.

In previous years before COVID was the focus, she worked tuberculosis control in Marshall County, making sure someone with latent TB infection had medications from the state, if someone had TB disease she'd observe them taking medication so the person would not be able to infect someone else.

She organized and audited children's vaccinations, and as required by state, she would go to every school in Marshall County to check every child's to see if immunizations were needed. Thompson often took calls to offer travel guidance for vaccines, disease investigations for

E. Coli or Salmonella or emergency preparedness for public health.

Ultimately, Thompson said public health is about "protecting the population, not individuals."

She never expected to face a pandemic, but she hasn't been discouraged by misinformation or seemingly endless online arguments. She remains positive and passionate about her role in educating and encouraging the overall health of Marshall County.

"I'm a registered nurse and love my job and love people. It's tough sometimes, but we need to give people grace. Coming back is looking people in the eye," she said.

Vaccine partnerships will continue to be a key in 2022 with Primary Health Care, McFarland Clinic, UnityPoint, JBS, NuCara and the Iowa Veterans Home.

"My job is to encourage and educate and guess what? Keep encouraging and educating and clarifying," she said.

She encourages people to use credible sources like the Iowa Department of Health and the CDC — and call her if they aren't sure.

She implores citizens to get vaccinated against COVID as she also encourages getting the flu shot.

“It's the only protection we have, so let's do it,” she said.

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