

The News Herald (thenewsherald.com), The Voice of Downriver

News

Survey shows Downriver municipalities adopting 'best practices' in shared services

Tuesday, March 15, 2011

By Rene Cizio

A few Downriver municipalities are showing Gov. Rick Snyder that they already are adopting cost-cutting "best practices" that he suggested for the state's 2011 budget.

Recently, Snyder asked the Michigan Municipal League to compile examples of shared services already in use.

According to a survey by the group, about 130 communities provided details of hundreds of examples of how they already are sharing services and saving taxpayer dollars. A few Downriver communities were among them.

The city of Lincoln Park reported that it entered an agreement with one of its unions to eliminate senior bus services and contracted with the Downriver Community Conference for that service.

Lincoln Park also shares its animal control and shelter services with Allen Park and Melvindale, as well, and recently joined a Downriver Central Dispatch with Southgate and Wyandotte.

The city, along with several others Downriver, are part of a collaborative public services agreement that shares purchasing and operational assistance among public works departments through the Southgate-based DCC.

Many Downriver communities also are part of the Southeast Michigan Information Alliance, which was formed four years ago to provide law enforcement data and communications links for police, courts and a state database.

Melvindale reported that it is participating in Downriver Mutual Aid with several communities, a shared animal shelter with Allen Park and Lincoln Park, and shared court services with Allen Park, among others.

Southgate city officials reported that they and the school district have entered into a partnership that will allow the district to occupy unused space at City Hall, reducing operating costs for the district and generating revenue for the city.

"We know with certainty that there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of additional examples of service sharing at the local levels that were not identified on our survey because it was only in the field for a short time," said Summer Minnick, the MML's director of state affairs. "In reality, most local governments participate in many more collaborative endeavors that were not reported."

There was a wide range of shared services reported not only from Downriver, but from other communities, as well.

Respondents offered 70 examples related to fire services alone, ranging from simple collaboration in training staff to consolidated departments.

Many Downriver municipalities reported providing services to surrounding areas through intermunicipal agreements, especially water, sewer and related utility services.

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments has more than 249 examples of locally shared services in its database.

The survey did not include services that have been privatized or contracted out.

"If those examples were included in the survey, we would be reporting literally thousands of examples of local government best practices to lower costs for their taxpayers and residents," said Arnold Weinfeld, the MML's director of strategic initiatives and federal affairs.

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News

SOUTHGATE: City discussing taking control over library from county

Saturday, March 12, 2011

By Rene Cizio

SOUTHGATE — City officials are planning to take over control of Southgate Veterans Memorial Library from the county.

The Southgate Library Reorganization Committee presented a report to the City Council recently, suggesting changing from a county library to a city library.

City officials figure they can save about \$120,000 annually by severing their ties with the county and running the library independently.

The current annual budget for the library is about \$600,000.

The library has been under county control since it was established in the 1950s. Last year, Mayor Joseph Kuspa authorized the creation of the committee to investigate the potential cost savings of changing the library structure.

The group is composed of three representatives from the Southgate Library Commission, two representatives from the city administration, a council liaison and head librarian Joyce Farkas.

The two librarians are county employees. The city, however, pays the county for those librarians. They expect to count a savings in decreases in the costs of overtime and benefits.

The city owns the library building, property and assets.

City Administrator Brandon Fournier said that changing to a city library will not affect the current reciprocity agreement with The Library Network book exchange program, and residents still will be able to have access to other community libraries and vice versa.

The other structure the city could have chosen was a district library.

Under the district plan, the library would have to partner with other cities or schools, and it would allow the district library to share personnel, services and resources.

The library property in a district plan would have to be transferred to the district, and a dedicated millage would have to be allocated.

As a city library, the city will be able to hire its own librarians under a personal employment contract. Wage and benefit

packages will need to be negotiated and approved by the council.

"This proposal made a lot of sense because it's not impacting services, but is contributing to cost savings," Kuspa said.

There will be a public hearing for the proposed change at 8 p.m. Wednesday at City Hall, 14400 Dix-Toledo.

If the change is approved by the council, a notice will be sent to the county and new city ordinances for the library will need to be created.

"In the long run, it will serve the residents just as well as the system we have now," Kuspa said.

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News

SOUTHGATE: Fire Department earns near \$800,000 SAFER grant

Tuesday, March 8, 2011

By Rene Cizio

SOUTHGATE — The Fire Department is one of four in Michigan receiving a grant to keep the city “safer.”

The city was awarded a two year SAFER grant valued at \$791,680. It intends to begin hiring three firefighters within 45 days, City Administrator Brandon Fournier said.

The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grants came through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The money is designed to be used to help address a variety of equipment, training, staffing and other firefighting and emergency medical service needs.

Fournier said the grant will allow the city to maintain its minimum staffing level and relieve pressure on the general fund.

Fire Chief Doug Gildner said the department has 22 firefighters. He said its minimum staffing requirement is 24, not including a fire marshal, which the department intends to promote once new firefighters are hired.

He said the city has been short by three firefighters through attrition over the last year.

“This will allow us to continue the same level of service we’ve been able to provide to the city,” Gildner said.

He said the grant will pay for the salary of the firefighters for two years.

“The award could not have come at a more crucial time as we continue to adjust to the seemingly endless challenges plaguing our state,” Mayor Joseph Kuspa said.

U.S. Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) said the city will benefit from the grant.

“Investing in our first-responders pays immediate dividends to the community,” he said.

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News

WYANDOTTE: Consolidated dispatch welcomes new city, looking for more (with video)

Tuesday, March 8, 2011

By Jim Kasuba

WYANDOTTE — At all levels of government, consolidating services is a goal everyone is talking about.

But for three Downriver cities, consolidation is more than just talk. A plan has been put into action in the form of consolidated emergency dispatch services.

Lincoln Park, Southgate and Wyandotte are the first area cities to combine 911 dispatch services under what is now known as Downriver Central Dispatch.

It's housed in Wyandotte's police station, shared with 27th District Court at 2015 Biddle Ave.

Although the plan was implemented in July when Southgate began sending its 911 calls to Wyandotte, Lincoln Park came online only about two weeks ago, bringing the consolidation plan to fruition.

Wyandotte police Detective Lt. Bobie Heck, one of the officers overseeing the transition, said there's room for more than just three cities in the consolidated dispatch center.

"We have capacity to bring in more communities, the smaller ones especially," he said.

Central dispatch is an offshoot of the Southeastern Michigan 9-1-1 Alliance, a group of several Downriver communities that purchased 911 equipment together at a savings.

Upgrades to the 911 system needed to be made according to federal mandates requiring a certain standard, and many communities were using outdated systems that couldn't track cell phones or work with other technology.

While there are many communities in the alliance, they each still have their own dispatchers.

Southgate City Administrator Brandon Fournier said the yearly cost to operate Downriver Central Dispatch will be about \$719,000 based on staffing levels for the three cities.

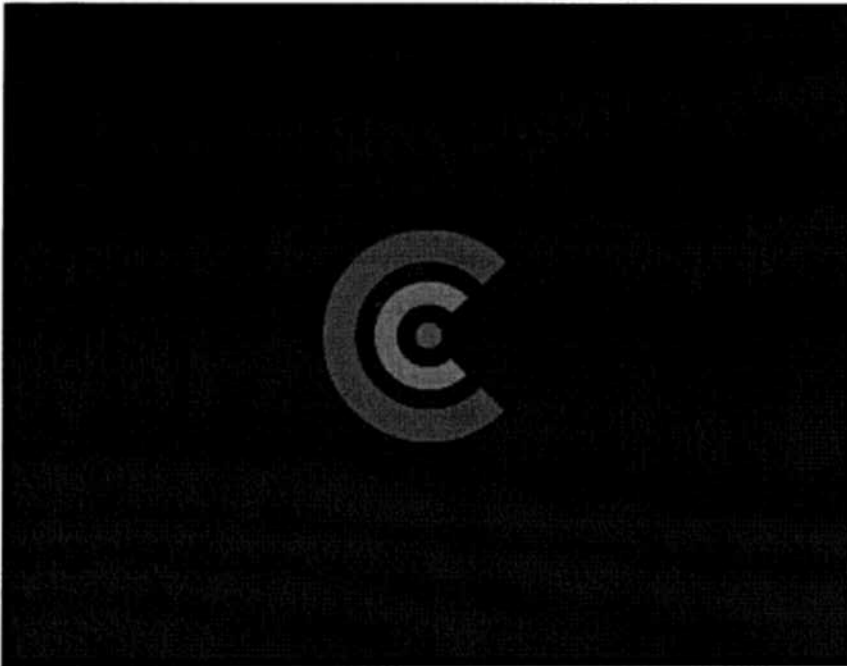
The cost is based on population and 911 call volume from each participating city. Member communities share the cost of the system, but that cost could go down if others join.

Heck said the three founding communities get relatively the same number of calls, resulting in each paying about 33 percent of the total cost.

"If someone like Riverview came in and their call volume would be like 10 percent, they would pay 10 percent of the costs," Heck said.

He said Downriver Central Dispatch has spoken to Riverview about the plan.

"We have made it clear that we are here," Heck said. "If you are interested, come on over. One of their issues is that they are on a different software platform. They would have to move to this, so I don't know what their costs are. It could be expensive, but I think there are some grants out there we are trying to point them to, to help them make that decision.



"We're interested in Allen Park. They are still evaluating if this is the right fit."

When Wyandotte opened its new police station a couple years ago, some people wondered why the command center was considerably larger than what the Police Department would seem to need.

The answer is consolidated dispatch. Communities had been discussing consolidated services for several years, and it was thought that dispatch would be the easiest place to start. Wyandotte officials built the large command center with growth in mind.

"What really pushed it over the edge was the financial crisis in the state," Heck said. "As the economics changed and cities are squeezing dollars everywhere, even if you can save \$100,000 or less by making a move, you've got to do it. \$100,000 is a cop in a lot of places, or a fireman."

Heck said the three current members of Downriver Central Dispatch are the perfect size for this type of consolidation. The main issue he sees with smaller departments joining the group has to do with prisoners.

"Those departments that have to watch prisoners, they have to have somebody there," Heck said. "For a smaller department, it's a more difficult decision for them because they still have to have that person watching prisoners.

"With a department like Lincoln Park, you don't need two people on the desk. You can put one of them on the road."

Wyandotte Police Chief Daniel Grant said uniformity is important.

"We want to do it the same way with all three departments so we don't have one technique for Southgate, one for Lincoln Park and one for Wyandotte," he said.

Grant credited Heck for analyzing staffing levels.

"Lt. Heck has been very good about determining at what time of day we are getting the most calls so we can staff the center appropriately," Grant said.

For the most part, two dispatchers are on duty all the time, but during the busiest times, a third person is added.

"We're working out some bugs, but it's getting smoother every day," Heck said. "When dispatchers answer a call, it can be coming from any of the three communities. An audible alarm goes off, so there's no mistaking a 911 call, but we also get administrator calls."

Heck explained that those calls might be for a police chief or the detective bureau at one of the three departments. The center also gets other nonemergency calls, which can be problematic because they can tie up lines. Police continually remind residents that 911 is for emergencies only.

"We want to educate everyone," Heck said. "Call the number you've always called. We give them a phone tree with a bunch of options. Always listen to the entire list before you make your choice. We can transfer a call, but it ties up a line in the process."

One fortuitous aspect of the formation of consolidated dispatch is that it didn't result in anyone losing their job, although some duties were reassigned in Lincoln Park.

Heck said Southgate budget reductions meant that three dispatcher positions were going to be eliminated.

"It just worked out that they were all eligible for retirement, so they retired and then came over to work for us," he said. "We hired all three of them. We were going to have to fill those positions anyway, and they are really good people."

Heck said the bottom line is that this never would have happened if it didn't make economic sense for all three cities.

Grant agreed, saying that Wyandotte expects to save \$140,000 to \$150,000 in the first full year of operation, even with some start-up costs such as uniforms and additional hours for training.

"We probably will save even more money in upcoming years," Grant said. "Right now, we are analyzing the personnel we need and tweaking staffing levels. There's a potential to save even more."

(Staff Writer Rene Cizio contributed to this report.)

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News

SOUTHGATE: Energy efficient light upgrade finished ahead of schedule

Tuesday, February 15, 2011

By Rene Cizio

SOUTHGATE — Bright lights, less money.

The city has completed its light-emitting diode conversion program ahead of schedule.

The city was awarded an \$89,000 Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grant from the state Department of Energy, Labor & Economic Growth to further its energy efficiency programs last year. It finished the project a month ahead of schedule.

City Administrator Brandon Fournier said the grant paid for the completion of a solar lighting project in the municipal complex, 14400 Dix-Toledo.

The program — part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act — was created to promote energy savings, create and retain jobs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The purpose of the grants is to assist local governments in implementing projects that install LED products and to increase general public awareness about the technology.

The Department of Public Services did all of the installation.

"I would like to commend the project managers, Wayne Darrel and Jerry Stacy, for completing the project so quickly," Mayor Joseph Kuspa said. "The city stands to receive immediate savings from the grant, and we need that now more than ever."

Other alternative energy projects in the city include: a solar panel walkway leading to its golf course clubhouse, which provides some of the electricity to run the facility, and a photovoltaic solar panel system at Veterans Memorial Library that produces electricity from sunlight. That electricity is connected to a power grid and reduces the amount of power the city has to buy.

Because of the library project, the city was the first Downriver to benefit from DTE Energy's pilot program, SolarCurrents, which pays customers who purchase and install solar photovoltaic systems on their residences or businesses.

The city also replaces bulbs and light fixtures when needed to lower wattage, save money and be more energy efficient.

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News

SOUTHGATE: Mayors says city can 'weather the storm' in State of the City

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

By Rene Cizio

SOUTHGATE — During a recent State of the City speech, Mayor Joseph Kuspa addressed several issues and programs.

He said the past year served as a pivotal point in the city's history, with the highlight being financial struggles.

"State funding shortfalls, decreased tax revenues and escalating costs created a perfect storm of financial uncertainty," Kuspa said.

"Despite this tsunami of circumstance, 2010 will forever be remembered as the year that Southgate held the line and stayed within our budget."

Kuspa said the city faced more than \$1 million in cuts from state-shared revenue and a city taxable value decrease of more than \$100 million. At the same time, there were increases in other aspects, such as health care and other employee costs.

"Virtually overnight, these factors combined had left our city with a \$1.6 million budgetary shortfall," he said.

Kuspa said the shortfalls could have devastated services and community programs.

Through various cuts and changes, the city was able to balance its budget of \$20.6 million and have about \$1 million in its fund balance. The Finance Department is anticipating a \$1.2 million budget shortfall over the next two years, though. The 2011-12 fiscal year starts July 1.

"With a great deal of hard work, Southgate is positioned to weather the storm," Kuspa said. "But the hard work has certainly not ended ... merely begun."

He thanked city employees and gave examples of good work in the city.

He said the Department of Public Services has continued to reduce carbon emissions and increase use of efficient alternative energy, for example, by purchasing a 2010 electric vehicle from proceeds of scrap metal sales.

Kuspa said the city received more than \$1.4 million in federal, state and county grants in 2010.

The grants include a \$100,000 energy efficiency grant from the Michigan Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth, used for an LED lighting conversion project in the municipal complex; and a \$50,000 pollution prevention grant from the state, which will be used to create a citywide climate action plan.

Kuspa said the Fire Department received a grant that provided residents with free battery replacements for their smoke detectors and a Federal Assistance to Firefighter Grant for more than \$150,000 that will be used to update firefighting equipment.

He noted the city's participation in the new Downriver Central Dispatch with Lincoln Park and Wyandotte.

"This is only the beginning of our regional cooperation with our neighbors," Kuspa said.

He said the city is implementing an online program for bill payments; an improved website, social media presence and mobile applications; and an increased capacity for wireless Internet for residents.

Kuspa said he is glad that AJM Packaging on Reeck Road will expand its manufacturing capacity and make a \$28 million investment and add about 200 jobs, and that the Walmart store construction on Dix-Toledo north of Eureka Road is progressing.

"This \$19 million investment is the first step toward revitalizing our primary Eureka Road business district," he said. "Walmart is on track to open in September and will employ over 300 people. Together with the AJM project, there will be nearly 600 new job opportunities in our city this year."

Kuspa said the Downtown Development Authority is also revitalized and has an expanded program that will offer more opportunities for businesses to improve their facilities. And, the Eureka Road Streetscape project begins this spring.

Kuspa said that as he talks to members of the community, he is filled with optimism about the city's future.

"These efforts reinforce my commitment to keep Southgate a great place to live, work and raise a family," he said.

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Business

EDITORIAL: Southgate workers, officials sacrifice to keep community on track

Tuesday, August 3, 2010

Last weekend, residents were able to enjoy the annual Southgate Heritage Days festival. Last month, many of the city's elected officials — led by the mayor, the city clerk and treasurer — agreed to forgo their wages for July in solidarity with unions in the city that agreed to take wage concessions that enabled Southgate to balance its budget and avoid a \$1.6 million shortfall. There may be no direct tie between the two issues, but they are still somewhat linked.

In a year of constant financial uncertainty, Southgate has been able to move forward. Taylor, Downriver's largest city facing a huge deficit, first downsized and then canceled its largely successful summer festival.

Riverview, a much smaller city facing many of the same difficulties, had canceled its popular summer festival earlier this year — the one that was scheduled on the Friday before Cruisin' Downriver each year.

Key players in the city of Southgate were able to avoid such disruptions — and even more — by joining hands and making the city's budget balance through hard work and sacrifice.

Last month, when first-term Mayor Joseph Kuspa, City Clerk Thomas Alexander and Treasurer Sheryl Denman agreed to forgo their July pay (\$1,700), they were just three more members of a long line of sacrifices. City Council members added that each of them would give back money to specifically fund concerts or other programs in the city.

Union concessions came from all over the landscape, including the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (it gave up a 2 percent increase, added 2 percent to pension contributions and is taking five furlough days). Other unions waived the same pay increase and added an additional 5.5 percent contribution to their retirement, along with accepting furlough days. Nonunion employees bit the bullet, too, on pay cuts.

Police concessions could add up to \$500,000 in annual savings. Some administrators took 9 percent pay cuts and city attorneys took 10 percent.

All of those cuts, we're sure, were very painful. Sacrifices can be very difficult. But they often are better than the alternative, which would have been layoffs.

As a result, Southgate moves forward. It isn't perfect — no city is — but thanks to many people making sacrifices, the community remains better because of it. And many people still were able to have fun and enjoy a festival over the weekend.

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News

SOUTHGATE: Three city officials give back their salaries for July

Tuesday, July 13, 2010

By Rene Cizio

SOUTHGATE — City officials are joining other municipal employees to help the city have a balanced budget.

Mayor Joseph Kuspa said that he, City Clerk Thomas Alexander and Treasurer Sheryl Denman are not taking any pay for the month of July. They are not full-time employees.

“The mayor, clerk and treasurer voluntarily — in solidarity — rescinded their wages for the month of July,” City Administrator Brandon Fournier said.

The total amount is about \$1,700 given back to the city.

Kuspa said they wanted to give the money back in support of nearly all of the city’s unions, whose members also took various wage cuts.

City Council members also said each of them would pay for a city concert, event or other program to ease the city’s burden and give back as the employees did.

Because of the unions’ concessions, the city has not had to lay off any employees, Fournier said.

The latest concessions came from American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1589. Members have agreed to forgo a 2 percent raise that was due, add a 2 percent contribution to their pensions and take five furlough days.

“It’s because of our employees’ cooperation and hard work (and) four months of negotiations that we’re able to balance the budget without any layoffs,” Fournier said.

Their concessions, among many others, have eliminated a \$1.6 million budget shortfall.

The city managed to erase the shortfall, and now its expected revenue and expenses for the 2010-11 fiscal year, which started July 1, is about \$20.6 million. There is about a \$1 million fund balance.

Kuspa said he decided that the only way to ensure the city’s future was to share the sacrifice and ask for concessions from the city’s seven unions.

While there will be some changes, none should be noticeable to residents, officials said.

Other city unions agreed to five voluntary furlough days, waiving a contractually required 2 percent pay raise due July 2 and adding an increase of 5.5 percent in retirement contributions.

The furlough days will be taken throughout the year. City functions will not be affected, officials said.

City officials also negotiated with the Police Department.

The concessions offered by officers ultimately could result in a \$500,000 yearly savings to the city, officials said.

Under the agreement, the department changed its scheduling to 12-hour shifts instead of eight-hour shifts. The change will reduce overtime and pension costs without impacting the city's ability to provide safety, Kuspa said.

Many nonunion employees, such as those at 28th District Court, also have agreed to pay cuts.

Fournier, Fire Chief Doug Gildner and Police Chief Thomas Coombs are taking 9 percent pay cuts. City Attorney Edward Zelenak and labor attorney Howard Shifman volunteered for 10 percent cuts.

The Fire Department is the only union still negotiating with the administration.

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Community Spotlight: Southgate

BY: PAT DOSTINE, 6/30/2010



The city's website markets itself as the dining capital of Downriver. And when you drive the nearly seven square miles of Southgate, it has its share of eateries: Irish, Thai, German, Polish, a lot of national chain restaurants and then some mom-n-pop kind of joints.

You'll notice the city's 75 acres of parks, including nine neighborhood parks, two community parks, a baseball complex, a municipal golf course and, of course, an impressive community ice and hockey rink.

Southgate hasn't experienced the high rates of home foreclosures that its neighbors have. Consequently, it didn't receive any

Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) monies from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), monies earmarked for the rehabilitation or demolition of abandoned structures.

"That has to do with the condition of our city," said Mayor Joseph Kuspa, one afternoon in his city office. Kuspa was elected in November 2009. "We don't have the kind of issues that other cities have. There's a plus and minus to that. On the one hand, we don't receive any of the federal monies. But we also don't have the [high rate of abandoned structures.]"

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Kuspa and Brandon Fournier, the city administrator, attribute Southgate's better condition relatively speaking to a high rate of home-ownership in the city. "That helps stabilize a community," Kuspa said.

The city's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program received \$40,000 in income last year from the repayment of home improvement loans back to the CDBG program. With the money, the

city installed CDBG-eligible automated doors and completed an elevator project in the civic center, and automated doors at city hall. "It was pretty unique to receive that much program income," Fournier said.

The city also received \$89,000 in Energy Efficient Community Block Grant (EECBG) monies and will use it to retrofit the over-head lighting around the municipal campus with more energy efficient lighting.

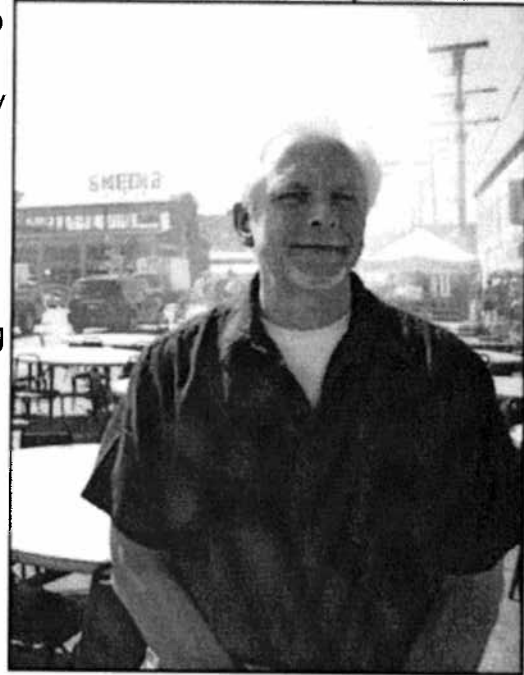
Reality bites

Many if not all of Wayne County's 43 cities and townships are facing declining state revenue and reduced property tax receipts, their bread and butter as it relates to delivering services like trash pick-up, public safety and park maintenance.

Southgate is facing a \$1.6-million shortfall this upcoming fiscal year, beginning July 1. But the city couldn't have a better chief elected officer working the big grill than Mayor Kuspa, a man who's one year older than the city itself, 53, raised and educated in Southgate, served on the school board from 1976-1989 fresh out of high school, served on the Downtown Development Authority, and built-up and runs a \$7 million a year wholesale, fresh vegetable distribution business in the Eastern Market.

Last November when Kuspa took office, in the midst of its current fiscal year, the state told the city it would be getting \$400,000 less than promised. "I said OK. We are going to make this happen without touching the staff," Kuspa said. "David [Angileri, director of finance], Brandon and I worked through the holidays ♦ and we found things we didn't need to do and we [made the cuts] without affecting the staff."

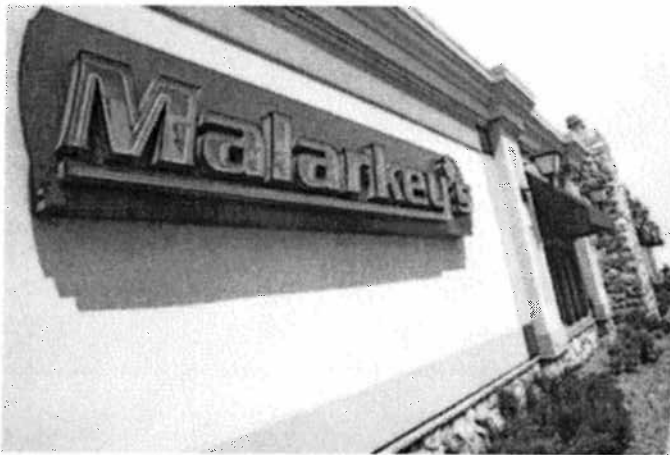
But Kuspa, who has a poster-size picture in his office of Southgate employees, a picture to remind him everyday that it's real people who are impacted by his decisions, said they knew in January the deficit for



fiscal year 2010-11 was going to be \$1.6 million. Kuspa said most of the unions have come to the table to help find a solution to the budget deficit.

"I want to emphasize that there were a number of unions that re-opened their contracts which was a major feat including the police," he said. "We've never had to do this in our city's 52-year history."

For example, the mayor points to the Southgate police changing their shifts from eight hours to 12 hours and modifying the way overtime is defined. "That will reduce overtime in this city by \$500,000 per year," Kuspa said.



The mayor said he had two objectives when his team began addressing the impending budget shortfall: One, everybody had to be involved including the bargaining units; and two, we had to keep an eye on preserving jobs. "And that's important as you weigh decisions and that should be one of your concerns and in

my case it is," Kuspa said.

Retaining what you have

Kuspa, a successful entrepreneur with a workhorse-like constitution, begins the day in his 40,000 square foot, Eastern Market warehouse at 2:30 a.m. and finishes it at city hall around supper time. The focus of his administration has been the retention of business, he said.

The mayor said his years of experience in the Eastern Market have taught him that business attraction is very expensive. "The more efficient way as I see it, based on the economy we are faced with, is to stress business retention here in Southgate."

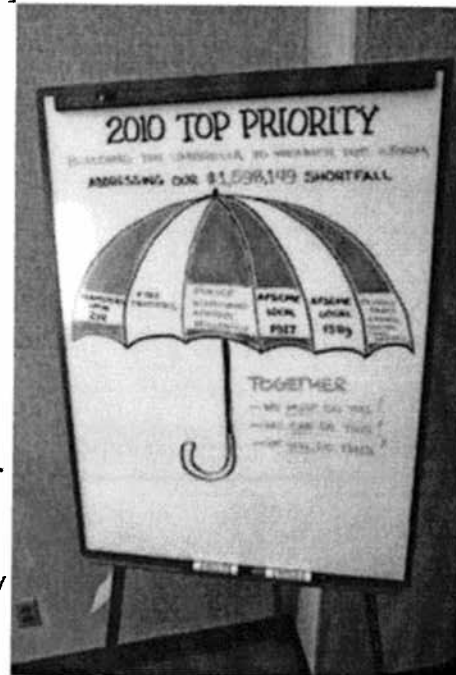
Toward that philosophy the mayor initiated something called the Southgate Business Advisory Council (SBAC) in January. SBAC is a

group of business owners in Southgate who meet directly with the administration to discuss issues that concern them and how best to weather the economic storm they face.

Though it just began in January, SBAC is already paying-off. Dick Genthe of Dick Genthe Chevrolet has a long-term contract with the News Herald to run full-page ads, which cost a pretty penny. But Genthe, Kuspa said, offered at a SBAC meeting to sell half of the page to local merchants at a "far reduced rate" so they could advertise and market their products. "This is how [Genthe] feels he can be proactive," Kuspa said.

"Hat's off to Dick Genthe," said Steve Johnson, 54, owner of Malarkey's Irish Pub in Southgate and a member of the DDA. Johnson added that Dick Genthe Chevrolet stepped up to sponsor this year's fireworks for the city of Southgate.

Kuspa said SBAC, in the long run, will ultimately steer the business community to become ambassadors to the business world. "If they feel Southgate is a great community to do business, both in a sense of municipality and the consumer, then they become our ambassadors and they talk to other businesses."



The other initiative Kuspa started was the Southgate Business Minute. At every council meeting a business is featured on the agenda. The owner or company representative has a minute or so to stand up in front of council, which is captured by the local cable channel, to talk about his or her business. The business is presented with a plaque made by the trade classes at the local high school. Then the city sends a press release and photo of the Business Minute recipient to the News Herald where it appears a week later, free of charge.

"It doesn't cost a lot to do what we are trying to do here and it creates a better relationship with the municipality in saying there is an open door," said Kuspa.

Other initiatives new to the DDA are the recent hiring of a contracted business coordinator to interface more with the business community, a \$7,500 matching grant funded improvement program call BIG

◆ Building Improvement Grant Program-- and a new DDA website to roll-out in the fall.

New attractions

But the city and the mayor would like you to know, notwithstanding the current focus on business retention, business attraction has always been a priority.

Kuspa said the DDA -- which he spent four years on, two of them as its chairman -- some years ago combined all the intake information one would need to open a business in Southgate onto one single document. And the prior administration, Kuspa said, streamlined the development process by having a review procedure where all the city departments as well as the city planner were at the same table with the developer at the initial meeting.



Investment is happening in Southgate. With the help of a no-interest \$20,000 DDA loan, a shuttered, derelict Burger King on Eureka near Trenton Road was demolished to make room for an Advanced Auto Parts supply store. The ribbon cutting is expected next month.

And on the corner of Dix and Eureka, just south of city hall, demolition will begin later this summer on a huge abandoned complex to make way for a brand new 80,000-square-foot Walmart. Officials say the new store will open next summer.

"The important thing to note here," said Kuspa, "is that the city did not have to offer any incentives for this to happen. They were interested in Southgate because of the demographics."

Kuspa added that Walmart agreed to pay for the installation of a special emergency vehicle light at the corner of Dix and Eureka as well as implementing DDA-mandated design criteria like low signage and other aesthetics. This is a notable change from today's business climate where prospective developers meet with city officials and typically expect tax incentives and other throw-ins to locate a business in the area.

Worth preserving

Kuspa is a thoughtful, reflective, regional-like leader. A business owner in Eastern Market since 1983, he was appointed by Mayor Dennis Archer to chair a task force which led to recommendations and improvements to the market. His work days are yeoman-like long. "My eleven-year old tucks me in bed around 7:30," he said with a smile on his face.



His experience from and commitment to the Eastern Market over the years is really a stand-alone feature by itself. However, it's influenced the way he's carried out his duties as mayor of Southgate. The use of committees and councils, for example, and inviting stakeholders in the community to participate to make recommendations and steer public policy is an old democratic process which Kuspa employs with success. SBAC is a case in point.

"I know as a business owner in Detroit I will listen to a fellow business person about Eastern Market or what his recommendations are about something rather than city hall," Kuspa said. "When you have your business community speaking up about what a great place Southgate is to do business, that's the best thing we can do."

Kuspa loves the sense of community in Southgate. He said he has neighbors he's been neighbors with for 40 years. He said when he

takes his daughter out for Halloween, he recognizes houses with the same families passing candy out when he was a kid.

"That to me is worth preserving and [motivated me] to run for mayor."

Pat Dostine is deputy press secretary for the Wayne County Executive and a regular contributor to the EDGE newsletter.

Photos were taken by James Wallace, who works for the Communication Division for Wayne County, with the exception of the photo of the mayor in his office.

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News

SOUTHGATE: City, schools talking about consolidating into City Hall

Tuesday, January 26, 2010

By Rene Cizio

SOUTHGATE — The city and the school district could begin sharing City Hall before too long.

Mayor Joseph Kuspa and school Supt. David Peden are discussing moving the Board of Education's offices into the municipal complex at 14400 Dix-Toledo.

"We're serving the same taxpayer and it makes sense to combine efforts to give them more tax value," Kuspa said.

The complex also is home to the Southgate library, the Police Department, 28th District Court, the Fire Department, the civic center and the city's golf course.

Peden said the school board still has a lease on a building at 13305 Reeck Road, until 2012, but he believes sharing space is worth looking into.

"It would be great for residents to come in the front door and have both of us available," he said.

The details of how the move would take place have not yet been discussed, but will be a topic during a combined school board and city meeting scheduled for Feb. 9.

Peden said there are about a dozen employees at the board office and it costs about \$105,000 a year to lease and maintain.

Kuspa said there is extra space at City Hall and little if any renovations would be required to move the district's administrative offices in.

"We have the space available to house them," he said. "It makes total sense."

Details as to what the school district would contribute to use the space have not been discussed.

Because of the district's recent financial struggles, officials are looking for creative ways to save money.

The district has 5,400 students and a yearly budget of \$46 million. About \$3.5 million needs to be cut out of this year's budget by June 30 for it to balance.

Kuspa said Downriver communities are good at working with each other, but now he wants to see what joint efforts can be accomplished within his city.

"It's time to look at what a community can do within its own borders," he said. "I think it's a natural marriage."

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