

*Year saw changes in the area's leaders

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 cess was more about what kind of Republican to choose than a choice between parties.

Long-time County Commissioner Ralph Unger, who has served Decatur for 40 years, was ousted from the race in the primaries. The primary and general election ballots listed just one Democrat, Brad Long, for commissioner on the east side of the county. There were two commission seats up for election this year, with Commissioner Gene Gallentine stepping down before the election.

In the end, Republican Brad Marcuson took the race for the 3rd District with 302 votes to write-in candidate Bob Jones, a former mayor of Jennings, who had 81 votes, and Mr. Long, who had 54.

The second seat was taken by Republican Sid Metcalf, who ran unopposed for Mr. Unger's seat in District 2. Decatur County votes were 2 percent under in the number of people casting ballots in the last presidential election four years ago, said County Clerk Colleen Geihlsler.

This year, said Ms. Geihlsler, who serves as county election officer, they had 364 advanced voters, when around 400 is the usual. By 6:30 a.m. election day, she said, there were already 12 voters at The Gateway, the county's main polling place, which opened at 7 a.m. The county saw a 78 percent voter turnout, as compared to the last presidential election in 2008, when the figure was 80 percent.

There were three questions on the ballot this year, for the state, county and City of Oberlin, and all were approved. County voters decided to allow corporate dairies to run a business here, if any should want to come. Because of a previous vote, corporate dairies weren't allowed, although family-owned dairies were. The question passed by a margin of 1,038 to 394.

The second question, for the city, was about approving a sales-tax increase to pay for a new swimming pool. The question basically asked if the voters were in favor of a 1.5 percent sales tax increase to pay for a new pool, and the vote was 567-311.

The last question was a state-wide constitutional amendment that would allow the Legislature to classify boats, jet skis and other watercraft separately for purposes of property-tax valuation. This question passed here 790 to 529.

The Water Project
 While these questions were answered with a ballot, one of the longer-running ones facing the city — how to provide water that meets federal standards — moved toward resolution through old-fashioned City Council grunt work.

The city's drinking water has too much uranium and arsenic, both naturally occurring minerals, in it under revised standards issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The standard for combined uranium, the letter the city must mail out says, is 30 micrograms per liter, and the city's water has 39. The water also gives off too much radiation, though people have been drinking it for decades.

To solve this problem, the city had planned to build a water treatment plant, but discovered that it could cost \$100,000 a year to dispose of the uranium. Even then, the city could be held accountable for all of the uranium taken from the water — forever. So in February, the council and the engineering firm Miller and Associates, out of McCook, started test drilling for wells that could supply water to meet the regulations. Of the six sites the engineers

looked at, four came back with test results within regulations. Since then, the city has applied for rights to the water and grants or loans to help pay for the estimated \$4 million project.

Last week, the council heard that the water rights had been approved by the state, in large part thanks to Rep. Ward Cassidy, who City Administrator Karen Larson said helped speed the process considerably. Come the new year, she said, the city will be surveying and Miller and Associates will be drawing up plans to drill the wells and lay pipelines to town. If all goes well, she said, work will begin by June.

Blighted Property
 While the council trudged forward on projects like the water wells, a different, and at times, far more emotional, subject presented itself over the summer — how to handle blighted or dangerous property.

The council works with Code Enforcement Officer Jan Ackerman, who works on a contract with Oberlin and other towns to monitor things liked junked vehicles, abandoned homes and yards left in disrepair. When people started turning up at council meetings over the summer to complain about the notices they'd received, the council members turned to her first.

With much debate between residents, the council and Mrs. Ackerman, the two problems emerged.

First, the warning letters sent to those residents were too harsh, the council decided, and Mrs. Ackerman agreed to write another draft.

As the council dug deeper into the heart of the issue, however, they found that it wasn't just about bruised feelings or letters, but the age and vagueness of the ordinance itself. It hadn't been altered since it had been put into place in the 1950s, when it was originally intended to be a kind of blanket rule for something that wasn't really a problem yet. Now that there is a problem, the ordinance lacked the definition and clarity that residents were looking for.

As of the last council meeting of the year, the ordinance was still in place and Mrs. Ackerman still at her post. But one of the first things on the docket for the new year — set for Thursday — will be a special council meeting devoted to rewriting the ordinance.

Outgoing Community Leaders
 There were a lot of big changes this year, not only in government but at another pillar of the community, the Decatur County Hospital.

Hospital Administrator Lynn Doeden, Dr. Stephen Albert, Physician's Assistant Sean Conroy and Nurse Practitioner Robin Williamson all left management firm Decatur Health Systems, its family practice clinic and the hospital this year. Former Administrator Charlie Myers came back to run the show, and Dr. Allen Hooper returned as medical director to fill the gap left by Dr. Albert. Mr. Myers left at the end of the year to make way for new administrator, Jonathan Owens.

Police Chief Wade Lockhart retired over the summer, and County Commissioner Gene Gallentine stepped down from his post. Long-time Commissioner Ralph Unger, who has served the county for 40 years, was defeated in the August Republican primary.

Former Mayor Bill Riedel made front-page news when he quit his position over the summer amidst the controversy of the blighted property ordinance.

Incoming Community Leaders
 But with the tumult of so many empty seats over the span of the last 12 months came an influx of

new blood.

Mr. Myers, who used to live in Oberlin and raised his family here, stepped up to the plate when Mrs. Doeden left. Dr. Allen Hooper, a former Oberlin physician, returned to help part-time and recently signed a contract to continue during 2013. At the end of the year, Mr. Myers passed the torch to the new hospital administrator, Jonathan Owens. Dr. Robert Rosin replaced Dr. Albert, and Nurse Practitioner Lynetta Ward came into the fold.

Commissioners-elect Brad Marcuson and Sid Metcalf will be taking their posts as of Tuesday, Jan. 15, and Officer Troy Haas became Chief Haas when Mr. Lockhart retired. Also new to the city and county were Officer Beau Downing and Highway Patrol Tooper John Gizzarelli.

And Council President Rob McFee took over from Mr. Riedel as mayor.

The Substation
 Looking over the past year, it's almost hard to imagine that 2012 began with a spark — or rather, Sparky: the now infamous raccoon, who chewed the wrong wire and took the city's electrical substation down last December.

Since then, the city has spent over \$740,000 on repairs, as compared to the original estimate of \$547,000. The cost has included repairing the transformer, renting another one in the meantime, and repairing the station itself.

The refurbished transformer should be installed without a hitch to services, said Bruce Marihugh, who works for Mid-States Energy Works out of Salina, but that won't mean the project is over. The work will take another couple of months at least, but should be completed before spring.

The city gets its electricity from Sunflower Electric Power Co., a cooperative based in Hays, which raised its rates by 4.7 percent this year. The city raised rates, boosting the service, or "meter," charge from \$5 to \$7 for residential customers and the average bill from \$81.58 a month to \$85.42.

The Streets
 Last, but not least for the city, was the streets project, which commenced in January, finished construction in November and will be off the books by February, leaving drivers with nine blocks of smooth new concrete pavement to replace the worst of the city's deteriorating asphalt.

City Administrative Assistant Steve Zdrov said there has been such a whirlwind of big-ticket projects this year, it's been hard to keep track of everything.

"It was a big year for capital projects," he said. "We were talking about it just the other day. We actually sat there and said OK, Smoky Valley, what were they working on? It's just been a big year for these kinds of things."

The city targeted the worst nine blocks of streets when it applied for a \$394,979 Community Development Block Grant from the state. Those streets had potholes, exposed earth, cracks and pavement edges as much as six inches above the gutter at some driveways.

Mr. Zdrov said that the end cost for the repairs came to about \$505,000, and that while the project is more or less over, the Department of Commerce, which administered the grant, won't officially wrap it up until the end of February.

"Of course, that's assuming nothing goes wrong," he chuckled. "I always kind of hold my breath on some of these government projects, because you never know what kind of little thing can go wrong."



WEARING A PORTABLE pool outfit, pool committee member Danielle Leitner ran the 5K Run/Walk to help raise money and awareness for the pool project this summer.

- Herald staff photo by Susan May

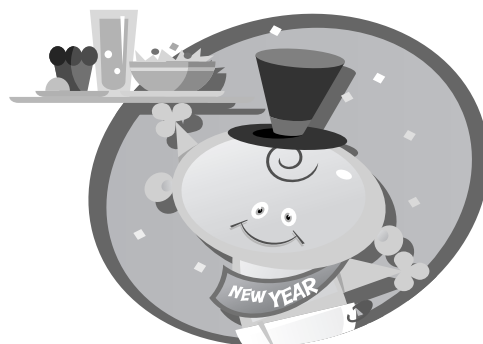
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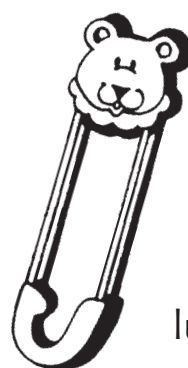
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