

June 8th, 2021 Water Tour

Last week, almost exactly five months since I was sworn in as mayor, I completed one of the major items on my “bucket list”: along with Council President Shirley Ward-Mullen and City Manager Shannon Beaucaire, and supervised by Public Works director Bryan Burnham, I got to tour Carlton’s water and sewer facilities, and visit the reservoir that is the source of our city water.

An hour after we finished the tour, Councilor Ward-Mullen, City Manager Beaucaire, Carlton Police Chief Kevin Martinez and I joined a small group of Carlton residents to discuss emergency preparedness for the city and our neighbors: what systems are in place, and what we need to start looking at doing both in terms of how to keep the city functioning and assisting citizens – and the biggest question: How city government can encourage and help citizens prepare to help themselves in an emergency.

The two events dove-tailed nicely, because one of the biggest challenges during the February ice storm, was the Public Works department’s concerns about keeping our water and sewer systems operational.

The facilities tour gave me a new appreciation for what it takes to keep our city functioning, and how effortless our staff makes it look. The monitoring and backup programs built into the entire water and sewer system are pretty much under constant observation—either remotely or in person, and there is always a human monitoring those programs. Public Works has someone on call 24/7 so they’re always tracking the physical plant and available if any of us has a water or sewer emergency.

Our tour began with the sewer pumping stations. The city has three pumping stations that bring the sewer from various parts of town to the main disposal line which carries it across the river to the processing lagoons. (Many of you may remember several years ago when the city was putting in the new transfer line from the south end of Wennerberg Park, under and across to the other side of the river.)

Large generators provide the backup power source for those pump stations, and during this winter’s ice storm Public Works put a lot of energy into ensuring those generators for both the water and sewer plants didn’t run out of fuel, so were able to keep operating around the clock.

We also had a tour of the pool house which has a supplemental water filtration system as the water treatment requirements for swimming are so different from those for the main water supply. I was surprised by the damage chlorine fumes can cause to buildings and pipes, and learned that the pool house is specifically designed to allow for increased ventilation to help alleviate some of that damage.

Our next stop was the sewer lagoons where we learned how the settling and separation works, and where the settled water goes. This is a more complicated process than just pumping the waste liquids into the lagoons and letting things separate, and this process too, is under constant supervision and testing. The ponds are currently about at capacity and are in need of dredging and enlargement in the immediate future; projects required at this point by the state Division of Environmental Quality, and the main reason we'll be seeing an increase in our sewer bills this year.

We then moved on to the storage and supply tanks up Meadow Lake Road. This was mostly a matter of standing at the base of the tank and feeling about the size of an ant; but I did get an answer to one question I've had: How does a tank that size get cleaned and the interior checked for structural problems? The answer: Divers!

We then moved on to the grand finale: A visit to the reservoir. (& kudos to Councilor Ward-Mullen who "piloted" her Honda Pilot over a typical logging road: barely half the width of the old railroad easement here in town, and full of logging debris with a sharp drop-off on one side.)

Standing on the bank of the reservoir you can easily see the silting fill that has taken place over the decades. This summer's dredging will be the first time it's been dredged in over 50 years, and given that it's located in the middle of an active logging area, you can imagine how much silt has gathered there with winter runoff and mudslides. Having now been there, I can better understand and visualize this summer's dredging project. The logistics will be pretty complicated as the equipment will have to be delivered by helicopter; the road is way too narrow for it to be trucked in.

The tour concluded with a visit to the water treatment plant. Ensuring our water is safe to drink isn't quite as simple as balancing the chemicals in your backyard pool, and I had never given a lot of thought to how much it takes to ensure our water is safe to drink. I neglected to ask if any of the Public Works staff has advanced chemistry degrees, but it wouldn't surprise me if they do!

Seeing the route our water takes from its source to our faucets – from the reservoir, to the treatment plant, through the main transmission line, to the big holding tanks, through the Meadow Lake transmission line, and into our homes, that water takes quite a journey; and I can better understand why each day it may be a little different from the day before, or the month before. And every step of the way, even with the careful monitoring and testing it receives, there are still factors we can't control.

With the reservoir dredging this year, and the replacement of the transmission line from Panther Creek to the Meadow Lake Road tanks though, we may find some welcome changes.

After completing the water tour, we had an hour's break, and then Councilor Ward-Mullen, City Manager Beaucaire, Carlton Police Chief Martinez and I gathered at the home of Peter and Marilyn Shultz where we were also joined by Carolyn Thompson-Rizer and Lisa and Kurt Roth – neighbors who have in the last several years become involved in disaster preparedness – a topic that should be moving to the top of all of our concern lists after last summer's wild fires and the winter's ice storm.

This is a topic that, if asked, most of us would agree is important, but actually doing something about it just never hits the top of our "To Do" lists. Luckily, we have a group of neighbors for whom it has moved to the top of that list and they have reached out to the city to find ways to get all of us involved.

This conversation is just the beginning of many that we hope to have with all of you. Things we need to talk about are: emergency communications in case we do lose telephone/internet; evacuation routes and ways of communicating with neighbors and family members; first aid resources, and backup supplies for those with ongoing medical needs...from insulin supplies to battery packs for electronics; and "go kits" containing meds, identifications, and important personal papers, that we can grab in case of evacuation. There is also the need for neighbors who have basic first aid emergency certifications.

That's just a short list of things that need to be considered, and those are just ones that apply to individuals. There is a longer list for our city government.

Over the next months...if not years....we all need to begin giving these issues some thought, and to begin creating a network of teams within our own neighborhoods so that we can be well prepared IF anything should happen. We hope, this summer, to begin introducing programs such as CERT (Community Emergency Response Team).

Especially after the Public Works tour, which looked at what I would call our city's circulatory system, I believe that having emergency training and preparation in place is equally critical. Our staff will do everything they can, and they have a strong mechanical backup/support system in place, but ultimately, the responsibility for staying safe and surviving any emergency rests with each of us.