

Officials share challenges

By Alexa Zoellner azoellner@dailyunion.com | Posted: Friday, September 30, 2016 9:34 am

JEFFERSON — More than 50 people turned out for Jefferson County’s first-ever Council of Governments on Thursday evening.

The event, which was open to the public, was held at the Jefferson County Fair Park Activity Center. Attendees included governmental representatives from the town, village, city, county and state levels.

A meet-and-greet was followed by reports from the school districts and town, municipal and county governments, as well as from state Sen. Janis Ringhand, D-Evansville, of District 15. Also speaking were Mark O’Connell, executive director of the Wisconsin Counties Association, and Jerry Deschane, executive director of the Wisconsin League of Municipalities.

“We do this work, not for ourselves and not just for our generation, but we do it for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and beyond,” Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Chairperson Jim Schroeder, who was an organizer of the event, said. “One of the visions of this group ... is to find issues where we can speak as one voice and be much more effective as we advocate ‘up the food chain’ to our state and federal representatives.”

Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier, who originally proposed the gathering, agreed.

“The first goal of this is to break down the barriers that exist even among governmental bodies and private sectors — shaking that hand, building that trust,” Wehmeier said. “So the goal then is, how do you create that to one common theme? There’s a lot of opportunities and challenges that



WORKING TOGETHER

WORKING TOGETHER — Jefferson County’s first-ever Council of Governments took place Thursday evening at the Jefferson County Fair Park from 5:30 to 8 p.m. The event had reports from town, municipal, county and state government officials, as well as a report from the school districts. Shown here, Jerry Deschane, executive director of the Wisconsin League of Municipalities, left, and Mark O’Connell, executive director of the Wisconsin Counties Association, speak to more than 50 attendees. For more photos, [click here](#). — Daily Union photos by Alexa Zoellner.

we all face and this is that opportunity to get together and bring those out and find a solution to these issues.”

School districts

Speaking for the school districts was Michael Garvey, superintendent of the school District of Johnson Creek. He began by speaking about the recently completed Johnson Creek Middle/High School, which opened at the start of this school year.

“What a great opportunity it’s been to finally get a new school in Johnson Creek (and) watch the portable buildings drive out of town,” Garvey said. “We were just about to the point where we had more classes outside of the building than inside, and so that was our breaking point.”

The school has a rather unique construction, consisting of five interconnected domes as opposed to a more traditional appearance.

“It doesn’t look as weird now as it did six months ago,” Garvey said. “It’s incredibly energy efficient. Our big piece with it, though, is that 109,000 square feet would have cost us \$8 million more than it did if we used conventional construction. On a \$20 million project, that’s a good chunk.”

For school districts across the state, Garvey said, he believes the biggest factor in school finance is revenue limits.

“(It was) pretty interesting and pretty effective when the revenue limits went in in the ’90s,” he said. “The Thompson administration was putting revenue limits on school districts and guaranteeing two-thirds funding for schools from the state. Well, I spent a lot of time this summer buying furniture, and we only have one leg of a three-legged stool left and that really isn’t working very well for us.”

He pointed out that the governor has pledged to add additional funding for schools in the upcoming 2017-19 biennial budget.

“That should be good for all of us,” Garvey said. “That should provide some property tax relief and also, hopefully, provide more dollars, and one of the things we’re hoping to see is making revenue limits whole and increasing as it relates to inflation. That’s what the law was before the revenue limits went in and our per-pupil increase. That would help all of us — taxpayers, educators — across the board.”

Towns

Speaking on behalf of the townships was Town of Watertown Board of Supervisors Chairperson Richard Gimler.

“(In) the villages and the county, we don’t have enough money for our roads,” Gimler said.

“Roads are our main issue. I think our governor and legislators are going to have to start with them. Right now, with the levy limits that we have, we don’t have enough money to go around.

“I’d hate to see our roads go back to gravel,” he continued. “Some townships are talking about putting their roads back to gravel. Gravel roads are very expensive to maintain.”

Also speaking was Jim Mode, Supervisor 2 of the Town of Jefferson Board of Supervisors and District 20 representative on the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors.

Mode explained that he was speaking on behalf of Town of Jefferson Board of Supervisors Chairperson Nancy Emons, who was unable to attend. Emons asked him to share three things in which she was interested.

“One is road maintenance,” Mode said. “We can no longer provide adequate road maintenance and, even less so, provide ... relief for our residents. While trying to maintain just the roads that can be maintained, we have and will continue to do improvements to the roads that have deteriorated to the patching stage of road life.”

The second thing was the cost of fire protection equipment and services.

“Because we contract for fire protection, we, like many other towns, need to invest heavily in the equipment dedicated to servicing our residents,” Mode said. “Because of the redundancy of the equipment in each fire district, the Town of Jefferson has come to rely on borrowing to meet the request for equipment, while at the same time relying on the mutual-aid system due to the lack of available volunteers.

“We, like other towns in our county, continue to purchase equipment that is under-utilized in our service district,” he continued. “Yet we utilize it in the mutual-aid system cobbled together in response when any one of our districts cannot respond.”

Third was interaction with state government.

“The ever-changing rules, restrictions and reporting requirements for state government has shifted the responsibilities of town clerks, treasurers and supervisors,” Mode said.

Municipalities

City of Watertown Mayor John David spoke for the municipalities.

“One of the biggest things that we have an issue with is funding for our streets,” he said. “We’re 150-plus years old; our infrastructure is a disaster. I know it and our citizens are like, ‘Are you going to do my street this year?’ and I think you’re probably all going through that.

“It’s, ‘Well, we only have so much money,’” David continued. “A million dollars — when you (build streets) starting four feet down and coming up — does not go very far. Honestly, that is probably the biggest challenge that we face.”

He said the city did some “really creative budgeting” this year and that, for the first time since the 1990s, the number of police and firefighter staffers was increased — by one each.

County

Jefferson County Administrator Wehmeier spoke about issues the county currently is facing, including the increase use of heroin, opioids and other drugs; changes in the University of Wisconsin-Extension office and transportation.

“Earlier this year in May, our local law enforcement, along with our Sheriff’s Office, our Human Services Department and the District Attorney’s Office, signed an MOU,” Wehmeier said, referring to a memorandum of understanding. “The MOU was looking at different strategies of how we can handle that situation. The goal is really looking at those who are non-dealers to look at the treatment alternatives and get them into treatment right away.”

He explained that many in law enforcement knew, from day-to-day interactions, who people with drug issues are and that putting them in the county jail wasn’t helping.

“Sept. 1, we were notified the state was investing in TAD program — treatment alternative programs — and we were lucky to be one of the recipients of the grants,” Wehmeier said. “What that’s going to allow us to do is maintain our alcohol treatment court, adding on some restricted substance alcohol issues. We also are going to start a drug treatment court.

“The goal is to have it as a tool when you deal with drugs, heroin and opioids, not only just to treat it,” he continued. “Sometimes just a treatment’s not going to work; sometimes people need a judge standing in front of them to help them through those situations, but that doesn’t mean they’re behind bars the whole time. So that’s a new approach we’re going to try. It’s going to start at the beginning of the year.”

The grant also allows for the hiring of a full-time staff member to help coordinate many of the items that come along with alcohol and drugs, as well as barriers in the criminal justice system.

“Another big topic the last few months within the county and all the counties across the state is, what’s the deal with UW-Extension?” Wehmeier said. “Because some of the budget cuts and some the realignment resources in the UW-Extension program, they’re looking at how to service the citizens of Wisconsin. There’s been numerous approaches going on and, in some ways, the beginning of this year was almost a reset of that program.”

He explained that it appears UW-Extension will take on a more regional approach, but that does not mean county-based educators will be gone.

“We hope by spring of next year we’ll have more finite details from the chancellor of where we’re going, but it is impacting some services right now,” Wehmeier said. “For those who aren’t aware, our community development agent retired in July and that position will not be filled. Dec. 16 of this year, our family living agent will also be retiring and that position will not be filled right away.

“We are able to hire a 4-H agent back, so we’re down from four agents to two for the time being,” he continued. “Once the determination is made working with the state, the chancellor and our partner counties — which will be Rock and Walworth, it looks like — we’ll look at an approach that works for all the counties to make the system work.”

Transportation was the third issue the county administrator cited.

“Highway Commissioner Bill Kern will be the first to tell you that, if you start looking at it, it’s not just the county roads,” Wehmeier said. “We start looking at the state highways that we’re responsible to help maintain via the state. This past year, we had to do a lot of work with a contractor on I-94, but ... that’s not getting any better. It’s getting worse. We know we have some bridges in the pipeline on I-94.

“At the same time, we have many projects that many here might deem priorities, but they’re not even in the five-year plan,” he continued. “One question I always get is, ‘Where is (U.S. Highway) 18 at?’ It’s not on the radar right now, folks. We start looking at what we need and those are the priorities we have to look at, and 18 is just an example of that. We invest approximately \$3.5 to \$4 million a year in tax levy to go to the roads, but those dollars get shorter and shorter as we go ahead.”

State

“I knew roads would be an issue,” Sen. Ringhand said. “I have a very diverse district ... so I have I-90 projects, rural roads, town chairmen who have me on speed dial because the roads are so bad, so I understand it and I get it.

“The money issue is worse than it’s ever been,” she continued. “When I got in the Legislature six years ago, there had already been proposals about ways of adding additional fees, taking money from other areas and trying to find a better way to fund the roads. That was done again a couple years ago. Both (proposals) are sitting on a shelf collecting dust. They have refused to bring those forward.”

Ringhand said she disagrees with that.

“I know how important it is that we do find revenue for these roads. We can’t continue to borrow,” she said. “We will be paying for this for years and years to come. We’re already at 20 cents on every transportation dollar in payback for interest. That can’t continue. If we borrow another million dollars in this budget, we’ll be up to 30 cents of every transportation dollar going toward paying off debt.”

It’s not sustainable, she said, and Senate majority and minority members are aware of that.

“I think we’re in for a battle,” Ringhand said. “I don’t know exactly how it’s going to all play out, but I think it’s time that it has to come to a head.”

O’Connell and Deschane spoke about challenges the state will face in its next budget.

“In this next budget, the state has no money and they’re not going to have any more money,” O’Connell said. “We are coming out of the recession slower than we anticipated. When the governor said — and you heard this some time ago — that 250,000 jobs would be created, in a normal recession, that would have been an incredible safe number.

“If we would have come out of the recession as we normally have in about 15 to 18 months, we would have generated or gotten back the jobs that we lost and so 250,000 jobs would have been a very safe number,” he continued. “The problem is, we didn’t come out of the recession in 15 or 18 or even 24 months, so we’ve not hit that 250,000 increased job market, which really would have brought us back up to just about where we were prior to 2008. We haven’t gotten there.”

That means there are fewer people working, fewer people employed and, given the kind of industry and economy Wisconsin has, there are not as many people making as much money. That, in turn, means they are not paying as much in taxes or sales taxes, so there is not as much revenue, Ringhand said.

“The state gets its revenue basically from two sources: income and sales,” O’Connell said.

“Neither is growing at the rate that we would like and, quite frankly, not at the rate that we had projected.”

Deschane added that about a quarter of the smallest cities and villages in Wisconsin still are in a recession.

“In Wisconsin, half the cities and villages have a population of 1,500 or less,” Deschane said.

“They’re still losing jobs, from a year-over-year perspective.”

Funding for education also is an issue the state will face.

“The UW System took a \$250 million hit last budget,” O’Connell said. “They have a \$42 million request into the governor this budget. They might get some of that. They’ve also asked for some tuition flexibility.

“If there are dollars allocated to the University of Wisconsin System, it may well come with some performance criteria and measure,” he continued. “If performance measures are met, then the dollars might be awarded. That might be the governor’s budget. The legislature may feel differently about that and then we’ll see.”

O’Connell also spoke about funding for grades K-12.

“The governor was clear about this. He intends to put dollars toward K-12,” he said. “You can put dollars into K-12. but if it’s the below the line credit, all you’re really doing is you’re offsetting the property tax bill and you’ve really done nothing to K-12. If you truly want to put dollars into K-12, you can’t put it into what’s called the below-the-line credit. You actually have to allocate dollars to K-12.”

He said that flexibility at the school level on expenditures will be talked about, but he’s not sure that there is a large enough audience in the Legislature and the governor’s office to get that done.

“(Transportation) is a gigantic issue and it’s such a gigantic issue that way, way early in the process ... lines have been drawn in the sand,” O’Connell said. “In my 28 years in government, this is the earliest an issue has ever had lines drawn in the sand. The governor said, ‘I’m not passing a budget that increases revenues (to transportation) without decreasing somewhere else. The speaker of the Assembly has said, ‘We are not passing a budget until we solve this problem,’ and the Senate is in a tough spot.”

Deschane agreed.

“We’re all used to seeing political showdowns,” Deschane said. “Showdowns are nothing new. What’s weird is they’re the same party. Normally, parties get together in the same room and say, ‘Let’s not embarrass ourselves by having a family fight publicly, but in this case, the speaker and the governor are in the same party and they’ve made diametrically opposed statements. I have no doubt that, if there was a bipartisan vote on transportation, it would pass both houses with a veto-proof majority. We will not have that vote. That’s just the way things work.”

Schroeder said he was pleased with conversation.

“I’m really, really happy about how it went,” Schroeder said. “The turnout was really good and the speakers we had were inspiring. We hope to have it on a regular basis.”

The governmental reports and discussion was followed by the first ever “Turnout for Transportation” event, which was hosted by the Wisconsin Counties Association, the Wisconsin League of Municipalities and the Wisconsin Towns Association.