



Year in Review: Resilience and Community in Times of Adversity

By Mayor Bob Higley

It has been one year since the world entered the COVID-19 era. Putting this pandemic in perspective, West University Place has persevered through hurricanes, floods, depressions, assassinations, and world wars over its century as a home rule city, but nothing has been quite like the COVID-19 experience.

2020 was a year of historic challenges for our great city, state, and nation. As a result of COVID-19, many of us have seen our worlds shrink to the four corners of our own homes, as we seek to keep ourselves and our families free from exposure, sickness and, perhaps, death. This insidious virus has greatly impacted our professional lives, as well.

Adding to this global pandemic, the numerous regional hurricanes and tropical storms that have occurred in 2020 have reminded us of the universal environmental threat of climate change.

Despite the uncertainty that we have all experienced in 2020, our City Council and staff have demonstrated the resiliency of our residents as we remain dedicated to delivering daily services and developing short- and long-term solutions for West U. It is with pride in our city that I look back on the accomplishments of 2020, and ahead to a 2021 that sees our continuing return to normalcy.

Public Safety

The pandemic underscored the importance of public safety – long a top priority for our residents and this City Council. In addition to our heartfelt COVID-19 mitigation efforts, West U has made long-term investments in public safety, markedly through the installation of our Virtual Gate security camera system. This Virtual Gate system, comprising strategically placed cameras around the city's perimeter, is designed to deter criminals and aid in solving crimes.

Phase I of the Virtual Gate system is well underway. The project will be finished in 2021, providing additional peace of mind to our homeowners and our families.

After a cautionary pause in services due to prevailing health guidelines, we have recently seen some in-person programming return to the Parks & Recreation Department.

Tax Rate Reduction

The hallmark of an outstanding budgeting process is a responsible, balanced budget. Your City Council and staff worked efficiently and effectively this year to ensure that the 2021 budget will continue to enhance our service model – once again, lowering taxes for the average West U homeowner and also adhering to our employee incentive pay plan.

Additionally, in this 2021 budget, we are holding fast on increases in our water, sewer and solid waste fees, even as the City is experiencing a net revenue loss of approximately \$1 million.

In this historically challenging time, such positive management of scarce resources is not the result of fancy financial engineering. It was achieved through our City Council's sound fiscal stewardship of the public's money, and involved experienced experts at the City management



level. Your Council is dedicated to ensuring that taxpaying homeowners will continue to get their money's worth from us.

Infrastructure from the Ground Up

While our team worked to address one of the greatest infectious disease threats in world history, City Council also continued to plan for the future of our community – and to invest in infrastructure that will benefit all West U citizens for decades to come.

The future includes replacing Buffalo Speedway over its entire course through West U, along with initiating engineering design on the citywide streets and drainage improvement project that will tackle the issue of drainage throughout our community.

Council has also approved funding to address concerns with water pooling along the curbs, day-to-day maintenance of storm drainage systems, and upgrades to the water and sewer systems to improve their reliability.

Keeping our eyes on maintaining our existing systems, while looking at long-term improvements, will uphold our enviable quality of life in West U for generations to come.

Quality of Life

In 2020, the West U City Council worked hard to protect our residents' quality of life. In addition to doing what was needed to protect our citizens against COVID-19, we worked on issues that affect our daily lives, such as updating noise and lighting ordinances. As times change, and our community progresses, it is vital to update our West University Place Code of Ordinances to ensure that we are proactively addressing our homeowners' needs.

Lastly, COVID-19 interrupted our methodical approach to evaluating subjects relevant to our taxpaying homeowners: traffic speed and safety. Specifically, our City's studies to evaluate speed limits in the city were delayed, due to decreased traffic during the pandemic. City Council is anxious to deliver on these issues, subsequent to our careful consideration of the data in these studies.

One matter that needed no in-depth study was the City Council's unanimous vote on October 26 to establish Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) Day as an official City of West U Holiday. Historically, an ordinance was passed by a previous Council on first reading 27 years ago, then tabled on the obligatory second reading. A procedural outcome that almost never happens, yet it did, curiously.

Following some unbounded curiosity, some thorough research by our staff, a motion was made, seconded, and passed unanimously, in short order by all four Councilmembers simultaneously. In brief, MLK Day is now an official City Holiday. No second reading, this time.

Thanks to you, there is a silver lining, despite the year's adversity. Our city has witnessed the strength of our community. We have noted the gratitude expressed by homeowners toward our frontline workers who work diligently each day to keep us safe, including those in the Police and Fire departments. Also working hard on the front lines have been City workers who ensure that the trash is collected, the water flows, recreational programming continues, City bills get paid,



and staff who deliver all of our City services. This is truly a team effort, with each individual's contribution ultimately of equal importance because, as the saying goes, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Without each member of this great team, we would fail on our commitment to deliver services that improve the quality of life for all taxpaying homeowners.

On a personal note, I salute our community members who have reached out to support the most vulnerable residents in our city, along with those parents who have become teachers to their homebound children – and those of our community who have taken on the responsibility of protecting not only themselves, but also their neighbors from this devilish virus.

West U is not "off-limits" to this deadly COVID-19 virus. Although COVID-19 threatens to take life from us, this virus has not stripped us of our sense of humanity or of our commitment to our community.

COVID-19 is not our fault, but it is our responsibility. We must own it. Single acts of human kindness are a potent antidote. My heartfelt thanks go out to each of you for your help and prayers.