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## City of Elkader looking for help, ideas in Keystone Bridge fundraising effort

Submitted by admin on Mon, 07/03/2023 - 13:02

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By Willis Patenaude, Times-Register

It was over a year ago now that a cracked stone changed so much about Elkader's Keystone Bridge project, like the work that needed to be done, extra steps that needed to be added, an extended timeline and, of course, the cost.

While the city of Elkader has already taken out interim financing to keep the project going, when it's all over, another loan will be needed to cover the additional cost due to that crack. According to city administrator Jennifer Cowser, as of now, that amount is between \$1.5 million and \$1.7 million. This prompted an appeal at a

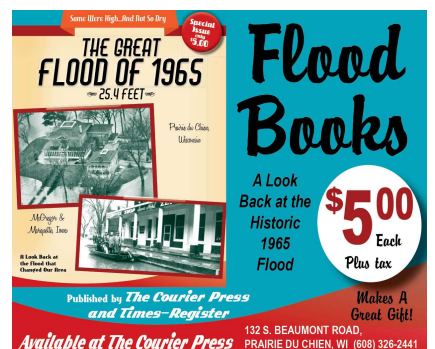
recent city council meeting for help with the ongoing fundraising efforts, which have not resulted in numbers anyone expected.

Over the last year, Cowser has spoken with numerous organizations, foundations, groups and representatives, including Upper Explorerland Regional Planning Commission, Destination Iowa Funds, Iowa Economic Development Authority, Iowa Department of Transportation, Great Places, Clayton County Historic Preservation Commission, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Historic Bridge Foundation and Congresswoman Ashley Hinson and Senator Chuck Grassley. Council member Tony Hauber spearheaded a GoFundMe page, which Cowser stated was "encouraged by the public."

As of today, all those efforts have raised \$160,000, with the bulk coming from the American Rescue Funds in the amount of \$132,000. The rest is made up of \$15,000 from Upper Mississippi Gaming Corporation, \$9,000 from



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historic preservation and \$4,950 from other fundraising. The GoFundMe page has raised \$2,245 of its \$180,000 goal.

One of the roadblocks to securing more money, especially grants, is the fact the project has already started, making it ineligible.

"Most, if not all, grants want to be involved in the process before it starts. Depending on the source of funds, some will dictate the procurement and bidding process," Cowsert said.

As far as the local response, there appears to be a myriad of factors at play. Namely, as Cowsert put it, there is a belief that "there has to be funding somewhere."

It's an assertion Cowsert generally agrees with, but despite her best efforts, which council member Deb Schmidt has witnessed, it's proving difficult to find.

It was also at that meeting that Schmidt suggested, "A lot of people aren't getting the picture."

In an email exchange, Schmidt explained the comment. "I feel the public is unaware how devastating the crack was to our town. That we have the oldest Keystone Bridge west of the Mississippi is a huge deal," she said.

Cowsert offered a similar analysis to the low number of local donations, stating, "I think it is difficult for people to understand because the work on the bridge continued. Had the work on the bridge halted until all funds needed were collected, it may have been different...So it doesn't present as much of a dire situation."

Hauber suggested additional causes, including people are simply busy, overworked and underpaid. The lack of a surge in donations hasn't spurred anyone to action.

"We need to get out there and reach them where they are at, make donating fast and easy, educate them on the value of these donations and help them support us in other ways that aren't only financial," Hauber said.

While Hauber made it clear the GoFundMe page was never meant to be the core of the fundraising effort, like Cowsert, there were higher expectations.

"I was hoping that it would generate more organic virility through shares from community members and leaders," Hauber said. "I'm not satisfied with where we are at in our fundraising journey."

With the council hitting "a point we need help," as Schmidt said, and Cowsert twice in recent meetings asking for help with the effort and any and all ideas when it comes to fundraising, what is to be expected? For starters, Hauber, who has put together a committee "to shock a little life into this campaign," is leading a much larger effort.

It's a group that includes a graphic designer, social media marketer and others who will implement a fundraising plan that could possibly include digital canvassing, promotion via local influencers and politicians, posters and table cards with QR codes to the donation page, social media content, promoting recurring donations and canvassing door-to-door. There are also plans to reach out to the Economic Vitality Committee from Main Street Elkader for assistance.

It's a redoubling of Hauber's efforts for a campaign in which he openly admitted, "We have to do more."

"This is what story making is about. People don't want to donate to a construction project. They want to donate to an icon of Elkader history. They want to donate to a symbol of connectivity. They want to donate to something that is defined by its future impact. We will have to do a better job about making them feel like they are part of making a difference and not just 'prepaying taxes,'" Hauber explained.

For Schmidt, the effort is also about preservation, not just of the Keystone Bridge, but the "beauty" and "way of life" that exists in small towns.

Schmidt said, "Small towns have many fundraisers and that's for a reason. There are no extra funds for much needed repairs or unfortunate problems. It's our choice to help our city as a community when needed."

When asked about the fundraising issues in an exchange outside the meeting, council member Eric Grau said, "I don't really know how to answer these questions. Fundraising is not really the council's job, and it's not my place to criticize the volunteers who are leading this effort."

While the fundraising efforts become revived, in the meantime, the city has to plan for the aforementioned loan, the details of which are not all known. It will become reality about six months after construction ends and it will take at least 20 years to pay off. It will also add to the city's debt capacity, which is 5 percent of the total assessed value of property in the community. Debt payments, like the bridge loan, count against it.

In Cowsert's estimation, based on previous loans of this type, assuming the loan repayments are \$175,000 per year, it would give the city a debt capacity of roughly \$3.9 million. The city has already used almost \$1.8 million, leaving very little room should another emergency happen.

Along with the extra strain placed on the debt capacity, the loan will result in higher property taxes from the very people the fundraising effort is asking money from. While the actual numbers remain unknown, Cowsert predicted it will go up a "few dollars more per \$1,000 of valuation."

Hauber stated property taxes going up was a "foregone conclusion" when the city entered into the process, and they can only be alleviated by the current fundraising effort.

"I wish I had a magic wand and could make the bridge problem go away, but all I can do is be the bearer of the bad news. If you want the town to have a bridge that is safe to use, this is the cost," Hauber said.

A comparable response was given by Schmidt, who asked, "Do we, as a council, please you all the time, or do we step in because it happens to be in our term and be the bad guys who raised the taxes?"

"Our government is going to be putting in place taxes that will certainly hurt small rural towns. Do I, as a council member, want to vote for this? No. But will I make that unpopular vote when I have to? Of course, I will, but with caution," Schmidt continued.

With the fundraising campaign flailing, another multi-million-dollar loan looming and an unavoidable increase in property taxes, it begs the question: Was it all worth it?

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According to Cowsert, who has received negative comments: "I think, in general, people in this area value historic preservation [and]. in the end, we accomplished what we set out to do, which was rehab the bridge so it can continue to be used for another 50 years."

Likewise, Hauber said, "This project is unequivocally worth it."

Schmidt noted the historic nature of a bridge that no other town can lay claim too and confidently stated, "I still have faith that people will come forth with help to pay for this project."

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