

State of the City

Bella Vista, Arkansas

March 25, 2024

The state of the city continues to be excellent. The city is in very good financial shape. Year-end 2023 financials are completed but are not yet audited. Operating revenues in the general fund increased by 12% to \$22.9 million. Operating expenses were \$18.4 million, which was \$500,000 less than budget. Despite significant capital expenditures and inflationary pressure, our unassigned reserve balance at year end was still substantial.

The city's 1% bond issue was passed in March 2020 to be used to build a new fire station on Glasgow Road, a new Public Safety Facility (PSF) to house the police, dispatch center and court, and a new Fire Training Tower. The fire station was completed in 2022, and the PSF was completed in the spring of 2023. The PSF is now fully functional, and it has been a tremendously positive step forward for the community. The court is regularly used two days per month for district court proceedings, two days per month for the Planning Commission, and two days per month for City Council meetings. The audio-visual portion of the court facility was recently completed, greatly enhancing the courtroom's functionality. The areas for the Police Department and dispatch are a spectacular improvement from the prior location. In addition, the police now have an indoor firing range for marksmanship training. The third portion of the bond issue was the Fire Training Tower, which was virtually complete at the end of 2023 and is now ready for use. The bond issue carries a low interest rate of 1.1%. It was initially estimated to be paid off in 2031, but new financial projections show an estimated payoff in October, 2027.

The Police Department has had another successful year and completed its move into the new Public Safety Facility. We have moved the Code Enforcement Division into the Police Department from Community Development, and this has been a successful transition. The police have continued their positive community relations through several community activities, including Coffee with a Cop, National Night Out, Citizens Police Academy and the Senior Safety Academy. The citizens demonstrated their appreciation by passing in March a ½ mill property tax increase to support police pensions. Bella Vista continues to be one of the safest cities in Arkansas, and in the U.S.

The fire department has also had a strong year. There were 4,339 fire and EMS calls, an 8% increase from the prior year. The new Fire Training Tower was recently completed. This will give the city the opportunity to have onsite training year-round, plus it is manned by two firefighters and can be used as backup, as there is an ambulance and fire truck on the premises. The Fire Department took delivery of its second ladder truck in the spring of 2023. We also received a new, remounted Braun ambulance in early 2023. In addition, the four building inspectors were moved from Community Development to the Fire Department. This team has been especially

busy due to the city's continued strong residential building market. Currently we are busy converting the former police department into living quarters for Fire Station #1.

The Community Development Services (CDS) Department had another busy year. There were about 500 new home building permits in Bella Vista in 2023, despite the much higher interest rates. Total building permits issued for all purposes were 9,200 in 2023. The new Phat Tire bike shop was opened, as well as the third iteration of a new restaurant in the former American Legion building. In addition, an Italian restaurant, Bella's Table, commenced operations on the west side. The Mercy Way Bridge project was completed in 2023, featuring a new pedestrian walkway and a bike path which is part of the Razorback Greenway. This bridge was a \$7 million project, with less than \$100,000 being paid by the city. The remainder was covered by federal grants (80%) and a Walton Family Foundation grant (20%). The Tanyard Creek bridge on Lancashire Boulevard was completed in 2023, and work has commenced on the Little Sugar bridge, also on Lancashire Boulevard. The Blowing Springs Greenway to Metfield is now widely used, and there are plans to extend it east on Trafalgar Road. There are also plans to extend a Razorback Greenway connector to the existing Riordan Road trailhead in the near future. CDS was also kept busy with numerous rezoning requests. Finally, the city's Planning Division launched a code reform and rezoning effort, spearheaded by consultant Freese and Nichols of Tulsa, OK. This effort is expected to extend into early 2025.

Due to retirement, the Street Department gained new leadership, led by Superintendent Karen Hunt and Assistant Superintendent Dan Downing. This group has outperformed expectations, with a stellar job of snow removal, repair of a rusted out major culvert on Chelsea Road, and the repair and reopening of Dogwood Drive after extensive storm damage. Turnover in this department has lessened substantially, and coordination with CDS has greatly increased. In 2023, the department completed 34 miles of slurry seal and nearly 11 miles of asphalt overlay. In addition, 1,418 work orders were successfully completed, and only 28 remained open at year end — a record low.

The library has had another good year, with expansion and growth in all categories. A major parking lot expansion was concluded in 2023, and this additional space was sorely needed to accommodate the library's increasing usage. The children's story hour had to expand to two sessions, due to the large number of participants. Special events at Halloween and Christmas were extremely well attended, and the summer reading program continues to thrive as well as programs for adults. Impact fee funds were recently used to add to the library's collection of books for all readers.

The Arts Council had a successful year, with new sculptures installed at the Public Safety Facility, featuring a police officer and police dog on one side of the entrance, and the traditional Lady Justice on the courtroom side. There were three sculptures added on the Bluebird Trail, as well as a new mural nearby on the Tunnel Vision Trail. In addition, Bella Vista in Bloom continues as an annual yarn bombing event, and the Artist Spotlight celebrations are held quarterly.

Additions and enhancements to the soft surface bike and walking trails are continuing on both the Back 40 and Little Sugar Trails. Recently the city established its first Active Transportation Advisory Board, and the city is partnering with others in the region to enhance the Razorback Greenway and Little Sugar Creek.

The Mayor, City Clerk, City Attorney and City Council had an extremely busy year, with 59 ordinances and 66 resolutions enacted in 2023. This exemplifies the extremely productive year at the city.

The long-term goal of our city is to have significant but controlled growth; to preserve our lakes, streams, and trees; to increase our connectivity via active transportation opportunities; and to continue to offer an excellent quality of life. The health and happiness of our citizens is our highest priority.