

Oswego shows the “Kan do” spirit with improvement projects

Located on the banks of the Neosho River in Labette County, the city of Oswego was originally established as a trading post around 1840. In 1870 the area known as White Hair’s Village was incorporated as a city of the third class. The Governor of Kansas issued a proclamation 10 years later in 1880 making Oswego a city of the second class. Additionally, Oswego is the county seat of Labette County.

Progress was on the minds of the people who first called Oswego home as history shows a strong desire to move the city forward. By 1887 the community had a school, library, telephone system and a waterworks system.

When history books are read in the future they will show that the

people living in Oswego today still possess the same progressive spirit that the founding fathers had. The age of Oswego’s existing infrastructure made it necessary to take a long, hard look at what needed to be done and to move towards making much needed improvements.



Bob Kirby
Tech Assistant

Stretching dollars

Communities today realize that they must stretch the limited available dollars as far as possible when planning public improvement projects. Oswego was no exception. The city aggressively pursued grant funds in order to maximize the impact of the local money being put forth to make the



The City of Oswego has pursued numerous grant opportunities. One project allowed for repairs to the swimming pool with funds from a comprehensive development grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce. The pool was originally constructed in 1936; the pool upgrades were part of an ongoing community improvement project.

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improvements. Early on the city pursued a planning grant that would upgrade the master plan for improvements within the community. They were successful in obtaining this funding and with a plan in place they have moved forward. In the competitive environment of grants today the city has been extremely successful in seeking and obtaining grant funding for their projects.

The city applied for and obtained grants from numerous agencies. One source of grant funding was the Kansas

Department of Commerce with a \$1,371,653 comprehensive development grant. The grant, which was awarded in 2004 with funds being contributed by the city, focused on items that would benefit community youth. The swimming pool, built in 1936, received new decking, piping and fencing. All of the electricity in the park was also moved underground and new restrooms and shower facilities were constructed in the camping areas. A new waterline was installed to the high school and ball fields. The city also used the grant to

replace three storm sirens. They also constructed a new 10,000 square foot community building. The funding was also used to demolish 18 dilapidated housing units. Also contributing to the cause was the Oswego Parks and Community Foundation. The Foundation contributed to park improvements by helping raise funds to replace the split rail fencing on the bluff overlooking the Neosho River and replacing lights with historical lighting.

The community realized that economic development was an important part of the overall plan. As such the city applied for and received an economic development grant to offer financial incentives to businesses in the community to assist a new industry in the community. As a result, the local employer went from having 20 employees to 100 which has helped increase the local tax base. The airport also received attention; four separate grants were awarded to Oswego to improve the overall safety of the site and to upgrade the airport master plan. This included burying overhead electrical lines and making other improvements on the grounds to make the area safer for aircraft using the facility.

In another aspect of community development the city offers utility incentives to persons building new homes in the community. In exchange for building their homes in the city, new homeowners may also gain property tax rebates. This financial incentive can be as high as 90% in identified areas and generally runs 75% over a five-year period. The city donated land to develop a housing addition where they have so far constructed three homes to sell. The city also donates city-owned land for building of new homes.

In addressing the needs of the water infrastructure the city partnered with Rural Development

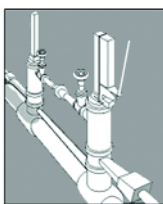
with a loan and grant package worth \$3,155,000. The funding included a 49.64% grant package worth \$1,566,000. The funding addressed needs at the water treatment plant, replaced 45 city blocks of water lines, made improvements at the water tower and also replaced numerous water meters. The price tag for the improvements at the water treatment plant alone was almost \$2,000,000. Customers benefiting

from the improvements also saw an increase in the monthly water bills. In 1997 the minimum water bill was \$8.40 while in 2007 the monthly minimum had increased to \$12.70. Without the grant funding made available from Rural Development the rates would have been much higher.

The city had addressed sanitary sewer issues in the 80s and 90s as well. Again with the help of Rural Development and a



The new community center in Oswego was also constructed using grant funds from a comprehensive development grant. The new community center is a focal point and is used for family reunions, fair exhibits, civic groups and recently a music festival.



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Good leadership pays big dividends by Dan Knupp

Rural Kansas communities with good infrastructure attract investment, create jobs, retain key workers and foster a positive citizen spirit. The key to the realm for attaining success in community projects is leadership.

"The last several Oswego city councils have been very forward thinking – and it's paid off! They have not been afraid to commit a little community investment now to get bigger rewards in the future," long-time Oswego City Clerk Cheri Peine said, making the point about her city's progressive leadership. "Past mayors Philip Blair and Jim Stephens as well as current Mayor Tom Bringle were successful leaders in the funding efforts."

Costs to maintain utilities and city functions are getting so high it becomes essential to plan for and keep up with changes in not only the rules/regulations but also advancements in technology that can make or break a city budget.

"I get good information on funding opportunities by looking for them – the *Lifeline* magazine has been a good source. I'd hate to think where our rates would be if we wouldn't have had our state and federal funding programs to help with these community projects," Peine said.

The numerous Oswego projects have had a few rough spots, but that can be expected in complex endeavors. "Teamwork has been a lifesaver for some of these problems. We've had city council members Jane Rea and Cindy Sanders, along with City Treasurer Alice Hornung, work with vendors to get the interior design and color scheme to work in the new community center. City

Superintendent Kevin Frogley has constantly been on-site and in project meetings for planning and construction efforts. All the paperwork goes through the clerk's office. In a community of only 2,000 people, many folks are seen at the front of the line to help out!"

Community response to city efforts has included a city election that tallied votes 2-1 for spending street overlay park improvement money on constructing and surfacing parking lots for the new community center. Usage at the community center is higher than ever thought by the the city council.

"Out-of-towner comments on the new center have been great – people are traveling to Oswego for community center events. Businesses are renovating downtown buildings, new families are building homes – all taking advantage of the retail business and neighborhood incentive programs. The second stage price increases on water goes out in October so we'll soon get feedback on those projects as well. I'd still hate to see where those rates would be without grant funds from the various funding agencies for the city's recent utility projects," Peine exclaimed.

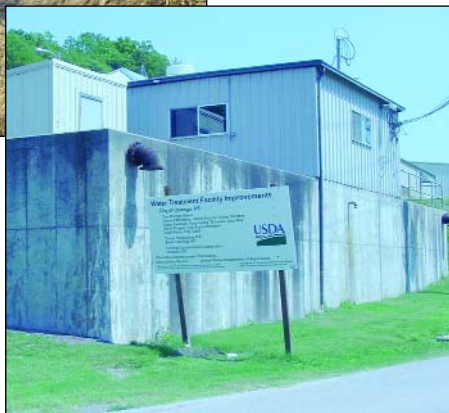
Good or bad, life goes on for a rural community – a life for Oswego that is not without a few new people, a few new businesses and a lot more promise than it had a decade or two ago – much more good than bad.



Oswego City Clerk
Cheri Peine



Pictures of the improvements to the water treatment plant both during construction (above) and after the work is completed (right). Without the help of grant funding through USDA Rural Development on the project costing \$3,155,000, the cost of water to Oswego's customers would have been unaffordable.



Community Development Block Grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce the city has completed relining of previously identified problem sewer lines and

making extensions into unserved areas of the community. This work has greatly reduced areas within the city limits that have no sewer service.

While Oswego has made many improvements over the last few years, they have no intention of stopping. Projects currently in the planning stages include an additional water line project, a storm water management project and additional housing improvements. If one wants to see what is possible through proper planning and hard work, then look no further than Oswego, Kansas. The improvements that have been made for the residents and the future of the community could serve as an example for other governing bodies across the state of Kansas.

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