



## CITY Manager

# January 2026 Update

Happy 2026! In an effort to offer an additional layer of transparency and inclusion. I intend on offering monthly updates for our residents and visitors. This could be pertaining to projects that we are currently working on or considering going forward with or could just some information that I believe would be helpful and interesting for our residents and visitors. I hope you enjoy!

-Aaron Mitchell, City Manager

### Look Back at 2025

2025 was an incredible year for the City of Otsego. While the year came with unplanned struggles, I feel there were definitely more good days than bad in 2025. To start with; we received over \$1.7M in grants! That by itself is remarkable, but on top of that the City was able to tackle a few unique problems with creative solutions. Some of the highlights are below:

- **Digital Sign-** For years we were told that we need to get more information out to the community. We had been planning for an entry sign in front of Brookside Park along the busy Allegan St. (M89). We decided to add a digital message component to the sign. This has allowed for us to improve our communication and allows the community a central location to find information. Not unlike these updates.
- **Elk's Lodge-** As some of you knew we purchased the Elk's Lodge from the organization in 2024 for the cost of the back taxes. Within this past year we were able to demolish the building after it became obvious that redevelopment was no longer an option due to the building's condition. Going forward it makes for a beautiful greenspace and could, I repeat "could" serve as a fire station expansion if needed.
- **Dam-** In April we were notified that the 150-year-old dam that the EPA has been intending on removing for 20+ years is now in need of emergency maintenance. The concern was that a portion of the northern spillway was broken off. It could be the sign of much direr situation that could have put the integrity of the dam in question. The good news is that after the repairs were made, the findings were positive and no further damage had been done. EGLE made this project a reality with a \$300K grant.
- **Playground Arson-** I am sure you remember the awful act of arson that took place at Northside Park on the morning after Labor Day. I am incredibly proud of the response that all City departments took to serve the community. The fire department were able to put the fire out quickly and saved a majority of the equipment, the DPW were able to remove the damaged portion and get the playground back open within 60 hours and the police department were able to apprehend the suspect. It was certainly a heinous act, but City employees were ready to respond and did.
- **Heavy Rescue Sale and Trailer Transition-** As most of you know; we have an aging fleet of fire trucks. Most are nearing 30 years old and their replacement costs are in the millions of dollars! Another thing to remember is that the trucks cost a lot just to maintain and the older the truck the higher the maintenance costs. So, with that in mind

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the Otsego Fire Department made the decision to sell the Heavy Rescue truck and utilize 2 trailers to hold the vital equipment that was previously stored on the truck. This transition allowed for us to review all of the equipment and replace what is needed and outfit these trailers for the foreseeable future. Going forward we have almost all new search and rescue equipment and 2 brand new customized trailers with next to zero needed maintenance. While we no longer have to maintain an aging large fire truck. The whole financial transition cost the department about \$10K, since we were able to sell the old truck for \$95K. This innovative idea will continue to save the department money for years to come.

**Water and Sewer Rates-** For many years now all things related to our water and wastewater systems have dealt with increased costs. We have attempted to prevent hiking the rates, understanding that your personal costs have also gone up. However, we have gotten to a point that we will be needing to do something to assure that both systems can sustain the needed costs going forward. The increase in costs are from chemicals, state regulations and mandates on top of the normal inflation increases we have all dealt with. In order to know exactly what those rate increases should be we have hired an independent contractor to offer their professional expertise to set the course for us to adequately provide revenue to maintain the current systems for years to come. That presentation will be held at a Workshop prior to our January 19<sup>th</sup> City Commission meeting at 6 pm. The City Commission will also be receiving some more details on potential rate increases during the annual budget workshops which will occur during the March and April meetings. We understand the fact that this process will not be popular, but it is needed. Please consider attending the Workshop on the 19<sup>th</sup> if you wish more information about the rate study process and recommendations.

**Snowy Sidewalks Explained-** As we appear to be in the midst of a long snowy winter. I would like to make sure all are aware of their expectations in relation to their sidewalks. Property owners are responsible for their sidewalks. They are expected to keep it clear of snow and ice. I know some of you have witnessed the DPW clearing some sidewalks and you are probably wondering “how does that work when I have to clear my sidewalks?” When the DPW finish cleaning up the streets and have a moment to take a breath (usually a day or 2 after a snow event), they will start to clear some of the main sidewalks that are the most highly trafficked in the City. We do this not to show favoritism, but to assure that those who utilize the main sidewalks (many of them young students) are able to walk safely. We understand that it is a pain to clear the sidewalks, but if you (or your children) were ever forced to walk along a frozen uneven sidewalk in the middle of the winter you would know how important that little extra work is. I and the walkers of the City thank you.

**Snow Plow Expectations-** As we navigate these winter months and the weather that comes with them; I would like to help set some expectations on when exactly we plow the streets. Plowing the entire City is quite a process. When substantial snow comes, it includes more than just plowing. It also includes salting and the removal of the snow after it is collected downtown. When the snow starts to pile up day in day out, it can be difficult to stay caught up. Ideally the snow comes overnight and our DPW team is able to start clearing it around 3 am. However, the weather does not always cooperate with that plan. You should also remember that our DPW team is small and only includes 5. While they are some incredibly talented 5 employees, they

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are only 5. This means that having shifts to cover all hours of the day are not possible. The result of that is all call-ins lead to overtime and could lead to burnout if multi-day storm events occur. These are variables that are all considered when snow comes down. As for the emergency call-ins; we try to wait until after a significant snow occurs and clean the streets unless they become unpassable. Otherwise we will quickly spend a lot of money and have burned out our employees before their normal workweek even begins. There will be weekends that has some snow and slush on the roads until we can tackle it on Mondays. While this may be mildly inconvenient and annoying at times, it provides substantial budget savings when you consider the potential 1.5 or 2 times the pay for emergency call-ins of our DPW. We also respond with salt to the major thoroughfares and residential intersections for safety. Another variable that is considered is the upcoming weather. If a warmup is scheduled we will try to avoid making a situation worse by plowing slush into your driveway. Sometimes it is a no-win situation and it is not always ideal to reside in Michigan in the winter months. We will have days where driving and walking on the streets is not possible. Hopefully they are few and far between. Please understand that we have an excellent efficient team that are making those decisions.

**The Passing of Hamilton Fire Chief Dave Haverdink-** Some of you may be aware that the Hamilton Fire Chief was struck by a car at an accident scene and eventually passed a few days later. My condolences to his many friends and family. I knew Chief Haverdink from sitting on the Allegan County 911 Policy and Procedures Board. On top of Dave being an excellent human being; he was nothing short of a wealth of knowledge in all things related to emergency response. At the age of 74 Dave had been serving his community in different roles (including Sherriff) for 51 years. 51 years! Think about that. That is an amazing commitment to one's community. I am not sure if Dave had ever been offered career opportunities to leave the area or not but I am certain they were possible. At one point I looked over at Dave during our meeting and realized the incredible asset he was to all residents of Allegan County in the different roles that he filled. It is interesting to get to know people who choose to stay in their community to continue to serve and make a difference. The Hamilton Fire Department is unfortunately charged with an impossible task; replacing Dave Haverdink. Allegan County would not be the place that it is without people like Dave Haverdink. There are others out there like Dave who choose to continue to serve their community when they either had options to leave for a bigger community or for a peaceful retirement, but continue to serve. I believe we owe an incredible debt of gratitude to those individuals. The amount of institutional knowledge that is placed within a few individuals across the county is remarkable and Dave was definitely one of those select individuals. Allegan County is a better place because of these individuals.

Aaron Mitchell  
City Manager

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