

## State of the Township January 12, 2021

Welcome to the sixth annual State of the Township address. To those of you that are here in person or to those that are reading this on line, welcome.

As we look forward to 2021, let's hope it will be different than the year we just finished. I would like to congratulate each of you on the board for being elected to a new term in office. I appreciate the board we have and look forward to continuing to work together. We have a great board and it is important that we have individuals that can work together and accept the viewpoints of others. We don't need to all agree on every issue, but we do need to respect others' viewpoints and sometimes agree to disagree. I feel very strongly that roads are one of the most important issues, but at the same time I know we don't all share that feeling, and I just need to accept that.

This past year has been a good year for us as a township, even with the pandemic. We were able to meet the needs of the residents. We never had to shut down the office. We were here to answer any questions. Building permits were issued and needed inspections delayed where possible. The cemetery was open, and we even had some new experiences this year. In the past most services at the cemetery were committal services. This year people were able to think outside the box and have entire funerals at the cemetery, even having open caskets at the cemetery. This is was something that I have never seen before.

One of the biggest differences that I experienced was the phone calls we received during the five weeks that I was the only one in the office. Calls that normally would take five minutes would then take 20 to 30 minutes. People just needed someone to listen to them. I think it was a lot harder for the people that were alone and not able to go out.

As a board we did accomplish a lot this past year. The biggest one was getting the township out of debt. Eight years ago, when I came into office and saw how much the township was paying in interest, indebtedness became one of my main goals. We now have an additional twenty thousand dollars that we can put into other projects every year. Early on in the year we received the new fire tender. We put in a new lift station on Sheridan Street, and we upgraded the 15-year-old system at the Hills of Mitchell Creek. We also took care of about two more miles of roads. Thank you, board, for all you have done. This has been a pretty good year for Big Rapids Charter Township.

Every year as I look back and see what has been accomplished, I am very thankful to the people that have made this possible. We have a great staff that has made all this possible. Everyone is working as a team and together.

As I look at our fire department, I am impressed at the new personnel we add each year. I know that this job takes a lot of young people, and therefore we do get a lot of turnover. How we keep getting the applicants that really want to serve others is amazing. Jim, Perry, and crew have done a better job of watching expenses this year; thank you. We still need to continue to watch this, but I can see us starting to put some money aside for a replacement truck in the future. I know it is easy to look at other departments and see what they have and want bigger, better, newer equipment, but the people of this township have been gracious in allowing us the millage we receive, and we need to show them that we can be good stewards of what we have. Since I have been here, we paid off the last truck, added onto

the fire hall, added a drone, added a couple of DNR trucks, and obtained the new chassis on the tender. Just think of what can be done in the future if we pay for things as we go rather than pay interest on things we can't afford. I would like to encourage the department to look at some grants that might be available for some of our smaller equipment. I know this past year the pandemic, including some of the staff having Covid, has been extra hard on all of you. Your team has always stood strong and has done a wonderful job again this year. Thank you for keeping all of us safe.

We have a great planning commission, and I know this year has been a little slower with requests, but you have done a very good job of getting the master plan together. We had hired Dave Bee to help, and he got us off to a good start. When the shutdown happened he was pulled off for more pressing issues for the region, so you folks finished it up under Tim's leadership. It was amazing to me to see how many people responded to the questionnaire. It shows that we have a lot of people that care about our community. Thank you for a job well done. I really appreciate how seriously each of you takes this position. That means a lot to the board and the entire community.

With a lot of people at home this year, I think we have had a lot more complaints on zoning issues. Tim, you are doing a good job handling these. I know it seems like it takes forever to get compliance, but the system is working the best that I have seen since I have been here, and that includes when I was handling them myself. Keep up the good work, and our township will look much better. I also think the fall clean-up helps to keep the complaints down. I do know that I receive a lot of compliments on the importance of the clean-up. Let's get behind this as a board and show the people we are listening to them.

The building department has been a little slower this year with less commercial construction. We have still had some new residential buildings going up, but that has slowed up fast with the cost of materials going up so quickly. The price of material makes it hard for someone to build. With this said, we still had a lot of remodeling done this year. A lot of this was by people doing the work themselves because they had extra time. Even with the shut-down, this department was able to work well together. Some times when an electrical, mechanical, or plumbing inspection needed to be done before the building inspection, it took a lot of cooperation, and you fellows worked well together. Everyone I have talked to was very happy in the end. We can't even guess what this year will bring for this department.

Due to the higher cost of building and people wanting to space out more, home sales have been going completely off the chart. This makes a lot of extra work for our assessor, but David has kept up. New sales always help our tax base because a lot of properties have been capped due to the Headlee Amendment years ago. When property sells and changes hands it becomes uncapped, and the taxable value moves up to the assessed value. Our tax base continues to go up every year. With the new regulations from the state in assessing, we are very thankful to have one of the best assessors in the state. One item under the new regulation is that everyone on the board of review will need additional training hours this year and then every other year to serve. Thanks to those that are on the Board of Review for not letting this scare you. Your willingness to continue to serve is appreciated. Along with the new regulations came the need for a designated assessor for the county. The state mandate has been met with the hiring of Seth Lattimore to fill this position.

I admit that I was very skeptical when the board decided on splitting up the office work a year ago, but this has worked out fine. Tim and Jami have worked very well together. Jami does all the cemetery entries as well as overseeing the office. She can also schedule building inspections as well as issue some mechanical and electrical permits. Tim works with all the inspectors. He works with George, the

building inspector, to issue building and occupancy permits. He does all the zoning inspections that are required before a building permit can be issued. He also works with the planning commission and records its minutes. Both are also very good with working with the public that come to the building. Thank you both for your commitment to this township. We also owe a big thank you to the building department staff: George Detrick, our building inspector; Mike Calif, the electrical inspector; and Jerry Antor, our plumbing and mechanical inspector. Thank you, gentlemen. I know it has not been an easy year to go into homes uncertain of who is sick or been around someone that was.

This spring Highbanks Park was in pretty bad shape when Marc started. The winter storms had played havoc with the all the pine trees along the driveway. Besides finishing up the snow plowing for the year, he started right in at the park. He cut up a lot of branches and hauled a lot of brush. The park and the cemetery were in good shape to open up. With all of Marc's maintenance experience and being a quick learner, he was ready for the summer. We told him he would have a lot of volunteer help from community services--some from the county and others from the schools. Well, this didn't happen, but even with his small crew Mar was able to keep the cemetery, the park, and our other properties looking good all year long. The weather was very cooperative, and everything is ready for winter. He even had extra time to do some more improvements at the park. One of the things I appreciate of Marc is his ability to do more of the maintenance himself. This, along with his Dutch heritage, has saved considerable expense. Thank you, Marc.

Now where do we go in 2021? Where do we concentrate our efforts as a board? Where should the people's money be invested so they would be best served in light of different needs? This is a big obligation that should not be taken lightly.

For those that are connected to our sewer system, we need to do our best to keep the cost down. What can we do this year to keep the cost down? We need to find ways to keep the I & I (infiltration and inflow) down. This is the extra waste the township pays to transport and have the city process. This also puts an extra burden on the system. The system has been evaluated and some of the problem areas have been worked on. Let's continue this year to upgrade it by fixing or replacing some of the manholes and lines that are old and allow ground water to seep in. The other big thing we can do is make sure all meters are calibrated correctly. We do not need to pay for sewage that is not going through our system. There has been significant progress in the last few years; let's continue to keep it up. Many of you may not know it, but there are a couple of volunteers on our utility committee that have a great and vast knowledge of pumping systems. They understand the needs we have and take their recommendations very seriously. Thank you, committee.

Speaking of volunteers, there are a lot of people that give of their time and expertise to help the township. I think especially of the roads committee and those that have served so faithfully for many years. They have the education and experience that we do not have to make good recommendations. Let's let them know how much we appreciate them. Also the cemetery committee, it was so nice to see them take the lead in the training this year of cleaning head stones. What a difference just a few headstones have made. Thank you for all the time put in. The input of the fire committee is also appreciated. These committees are not needed by law, but, for me, this has been a God-send to have qualified people bringing the board recommendations. If you know of anyone else in the community that would be willing to serve on a committee, please let me know.

As I thank people for helping, I would be amiss if I didn't mention our deputies. The clerk, treasurer, and I each have a deputy. Brent Mason, who was in the office for over seven years, is my deputy, Mary Bechaz is Penny's deputy, and Cheryl Kondziolka is Hannah's deputy. All three do a great job and help in any way they can. Thank you.

We owe it to the people to be well protected by a great fire department. We as a board have the final responsibility for this department. That does not mean that we need to micro manage this department, but we need to keep them accountable. Some of the equipment is getting old; we need to start planning to have a system of replacing equipment when it is obsolete. Looking at the capital improvement plan, there needs to be a plan for many years of being able to safely operate the fire department. The fine working relationship with the city fire department needs to be maintained.

A few years ago I would get on the average two to three calls a week complaining about our roads. Now if I get two to three calls a month that is high. The residents see that we are working on the roads. This improvement needs to continue to be seen every year. Other than the debt that we paid off this year, this is the number one concern for me since I took office and is based upon feedback from the residents. I know that the county road commission is looking at a county wide millage. This may help us a little, but it may also hurt us. Our people will be helping to pay for roads outside the township, and, yes, I know that we occasionally drive on these roads as we travel outside of the area. The roads committee is looking at a lot of maintenance for this year. It will not be as glorious as replacing a mile or two of roads, but it is very necessary to protect the investment we have made over the last few years. As the committee makes recommendations for this year, please support them. It is hard for some people to see when we improve roads in front of others homes and not theirs, but we need to be wise about our investments. Let's get our paved roads up in good condition and then start on some of the more traveled gravel.

This year a millage renewal for the city library is needed. We need to get behind this and pass it again. Our people do use the library, and it is needed. As I have said many times in the past, the three things that people moving into an area look for are schools, roads, and health care. I think the library goes along with education.

Our population continues to grow. At this time it is not known if the 2020 census will show that, but it is very obvious with all the new housing we have seen going up. It is great to see the Hills of Mitchell Creek starting to move after all the time it sat vacant. But, as the population goes up, so are the expectations on the township. More recreational options need to be looked at. What can be done at Highbanks Park? Are additional parks and sports fields needed? Do we need to work together with the city, other townships, or the county to create some of these? The city is working on expanding the services at Hemlock Park. Maybe we should look into joining in with them on this project. In the past we have been approached about having ball diamonds at the industrial park. This would be an ideal place for a sports complex where tournaments could be held. If we think outside the box, this may be something that we could partner with others on.

One thing we need to continue looking at is the replacement of the building at the cemetery entrance. This has been put on hold, and the building has been torn down. It is a lot safer now, but, as building costs come down, I would hope that we might partner with some local contractors to see what could be put back up. If not, we need to seriously look at returning the donations that were received for this building.

If we want to keep up our tax base so we can do some of the afore mentioned things, we need to keep property assessments accurate and fair. For this year, that will mean going to the tax tribunal to prove our values for a couple of our box stores. For a large corporation, that might save a half million in taxes over the next several years. If they challenge 25 small communities and win only one, it is worth their time. This is the way they justify their challenge, but we must prove our work. We will need to hire an outside appraiser to do an appraisal that an attorney can take to the commission. We are talking with the city and maybe some others to get several appraisals at once to keep the cost down. For us it is the cost of doing business, and, if we win, it will be a big plus to the local schools as well as the county.

Something else I hope we can do more of this year is to help clean up our community. People should not have to look out their windows or drive by and see a neighbor's junk. This is a very touchy subject, and we need to be reasonable and fair. You do have rights as a property owner, but so do your neighbors. It will not happen overnight, but if we can get one or two cleaned up each year it will improve the looks of our community.

We as a board should be looking at bringing more broadband to the area. Ways to have our entire township covered needs to be continued to be looked at. Jerry has been working on this, and we owe him big thanks for the little improvement we have. This really came to light this year as schools tried to teach virtually. Another thing Jerry has been following is the infestation of the gypsy moth. Depending on the weather in the next couple of years, something may need to be done to stop this in the county again.

One area that we really need to think outside the box on is the industrial park. It may be time to reach out to some solar companies and see if we can get some interest. Maybe we need to work with Green Township to encourage the development of the 19 Mile Road interchange. Development there would need sewer and water, and we could be the supplier of water. This would be another area that we could work together with another municipality to better our community.

A lot of these ideas that I presented have been brought to mind from the survey that we did for the master plan. There were many ideas that I would like to focus on over the next several years, but the one thing that came across loud and clear was that people like to live in a rural area.

As I finish this, I would thank you for reading this as it was not possible to meet in person with the current governor's orders in place. Have a better 2021, and hopefully a year from now I can deliver a positive report for this year in person. Thank you for allowing me to serve with you. I do feel very blessed to be able to continue to serve. Even with the pandemic, the state of the township is very good.