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Johnstown and Milliken primed, ready for growth

Written by Matt Lubich
Wednesday, 12 October 2016 15:36



By Emily Clingman/The Johnstown Breeze

Ask Mayor Scott James how he feels about the future of his town and he'll tell you it's a great time to be Johnstown.

"I will not take any of that credit," James said. "It's people who were on town boards long before me, dating back to the 40s, 50s and 60s. Those people left Johnstown in great shape."

When James considers growth, the biggest limiting factor is water.

"People wonder when we will stop growing," James said, regarding Colorado's continuing population increase. "Well, it's simple – when water gets cost prohibitive. And, frankly, we're kind of coming up on that right now. You see that in different parts of the state."

James said Johnstown is in a great spot though.

"We are water wealthy," he said. "And will be for the next five decades at least."

It's not just good news on the water front. The Johnstown/Milliken region as a whole is seeing significant growth and stability. James said the economy has been "somewhat immune" to the downs and "positively affected" by the ups. When he talks to people in the community, especially business owners, and at the school district, their most common desire is to see the population increase.

Though the population hovers around 14,000, James predicts a jump to about 20,000 in the next few years.

"Activity begets activity," James said. "We're taking steps that will spark that activity. We're working to prime the growth pump."

The Town of Johnstown has hit a wall though and is losing out on several development opportunities because Johnstown does not allow metropolitan districts to be a financing tool for residential development, the mayor said. Major production builders won't build in Johnstown unless metro district financing is available.

The Town is in the process of creating a policy to allow metro districts to be in place by November, James said.

"We'll see a whole lot of property south of (Highway) 60 come online as far as development goes," he said. "I see four to seven hundred, even a thousand homes available within the near future four to five years."

James said the potential for growth gives hope to the school district and business owners. "They know that there is good news on the horizon," he said.

More students means district improvements

Re-5J Superintendent Dr. Martin Foster would like to see more families move to the school district.

"That's what we're hoping for," Foster said. "At some point, we really want to do some things with the facilities. Everyone wants to know when we're going to have a new high school, and those kinds of things. That's where growth is really important for us as well."

The district's intention is to create a master facilities plan this academic year, if the Board of Education approves the idea at its Oct. 12 meeting, Foster said. It would involve a full assessment of the district's existing facilities. Some are in drastic need of upgrades. It would also evaluate the cost for a new high school.

"We've got to have more kids if we're going to be able to support more facilities," Foster said. "That's how our funding is raised, through a formula – how many kids you have in the district, times whatever they (the state) give you per student. That's the basis for our yearly funding."

A housing sweet spot

Milliken has hit a niche price point for a certain section of homes, compared to a lot of neighboring communities, according to Town Administrator Kent Brown. The last two years saw 80 to 90 new single-family homes, which is a 4 percent growth. This year the percentage of growth is expected to increase by 7 percent.

"Homes west of I-25 are more expensive," Brown said. "As you move east, we're a good alternative. The addition of the Milliken Activities Center and the charter school seems to be working well because more people are buying (homes)."

Brown believes the geographic position of Milliken and Johnstown is a leading advantage within a larger triangle made up of Greeley, Fort Collins and Boulder. The average home price is \$200,000 to \$250,000. There are about 500 platted lots available. Most are for single-family housing, but there are options for other types of homes – multi-family and luxury homes for example.

"It's a place just off the beaten path, safe and secure to raise your family," Brown said. "It's still a bit agricultural, not completely urbanized. It doesn't feel like a big city. That gives a comfortable feeling to many folks.

"As we develop more housing, more and more businesses will come to Milliken," Brown said. "It all depends on rooftops and traffic."

Milliken officials are also discussing the idea of becoming a "home rule" community as another upward growth strategy the Town is considering.

Community wellbeing

The Thompson Rivers Parks and Recreation District is currently shifting its focus from facility building to serving people. The district had been planning for about 10 years on building a recreation center, but plans changed.

"When the Town of Johnstown took that project over, we were a little lost," TRPR Executive Director Clint Dudley said. "It was sort of our North Star."

The entire team of staff members at TRPR is going through a strategic planning process for the next six months, Dudley said. They will discuss what the next three to five years should be like, where the focus should be, and how to best serve the community. The district will also launch a campaign to communicate with the public.

"Public outreach, community engagement, a lot of surveys and special events will take place over the next six months," Dudley said.

Dudley takes pride in overseeing a stand-alone recreation district versus one that is municipally run. TRPR is able to strictly focus on the health, wellness and happiness of people in the community, he said.

"Municipalities have so many other things they have to worry about ... police, water, streets. But our whole organization is about recreation," Dudley said. "It's a fantastic asset to the community when there's one organization focused on something important like parks and recreation."

While parks and recreation has been important for the last 30 or 40 years, there has been a value shift recently, according to Dudley.

"It's almost been a critical service in the last five or six years," he said. "A lot of that has to do with people now understanding how important it is for their kids to be connected with nature and to be active and socially connected outside of the home."

Dudley noted that the shift in American health ideals in general positions TRPR to revamp the district's vision.

"Now we can really focus on these things," Dudley said. "That's why it's important to have a parks and rec district."

2534 and beyond

Johnstown Town Manager Roy Lauricello said the Interstate 25 and U.S. Highway 34 east/west corridors have especially been of interest when planning the future of Johnstown.

The Town's projections are based on the annual population estimates from the state demographer's office. Lauricello said plans – including water, sanitation and transportation for example – are in place to accommodate growth.

"We don't look into the future in terms of how fast we'll grow, but how we will accommodate the growth when it comes," Lauricello said. "We've planned a framework of infrastructure to move into place as needed."

Johnstown Town Planner John Franklin points to the numbers when evaluating growth in Johnstown. In 2004, Franklin said the Town collected just over \$700,000 in sales tax revenue. This year, revenue is projected to be close to \$3 million, thanks to 2534 progress. At full development, 2534, based on figures given from an outside consultant, will generate \$7 million.

The Town also reports a resurgence of multi-family units in the region. Lauricello said retail and service businesses in the 2534 area create sustainability.

"People can live, work and commute from that area," he said. "People won't have to travel so far to enjoy the benefits of the region."

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