

Message from the Mayor: What A Year It Was

What a year it was...2011, notable for so many things in Westfield, but will forever be remembered as the year Mother Nature wreaked havoc on Westfield and the region. Through it all though, our city continued to function and in fact continued to demonstrate a great ability to regain normalcy through thick and thin. This was due to the hard work and dedication of all our city employees. Times have been tough over the years for all of us and certainly for our employees. But when you add in all of the events of this year and the fact that for many of us we hardly noticed a change of life.

Early on, I recall in January, that we had a quick 1 or 2 inch snowstorm on a Sunday and we were slow in calling out the plows. Come Monday morning, did I ever hear about that...our phones were jammed with upset citizens. Then just a few days later, bam, a huge snowstorm that dropped a ton of snow in the city and we had it all cleaned up in record time. But then it did not stop there, it just kept snowing and yet we still kept up with a good job of clearing the streets. We even broke out the 1970's snow blower to remove snow from the tree belts. With winter on peoples' minds, rest assured that we have updated our snow fighting equipment.

One of the most amazing efforts by our employees came the week of the June 1 Tornado. That week is a tough week for us anyway as we have three high school graduations in two days to attend to. The Tornado struck on a Wednesday and the Voc-Tech Graduation was scheduled for Thursday night and WHS on Friday night. Our school and city staff, already stretched thin from responding to the Tornado, put in a tremendous effort so that the graduations could go on without a hitch.

During Hurricane Irene, our staff at the Granville Reservoir responded quickly when the torrent of rain filled the reservoir and caused a record level of water to spill into the spill way and then blew out the lower end of the spill way. Without missing a beat they opened up emergency valves and kept the damage from growing exponentially. Additionally, I would like to recognize the efforts of our Police and Fire Department personnel that quickly moved to get the evacuation orders implemented for parts of Route 20. They didn't have much time to spread the word but they got the job done.

Then came the October snowstorm, what more can be said. Like with the storms before that the DPW, PD, FD, G&E and all put in a MVP effort. But one very important function we do was noted by a few people (including myself in town and that was the effort by our sanitation employees. Without missing a beat, they were out on the street making sure our garbage and recycling collection efforts were completed. There's a funny saying in politics, that in communities that have had override votes to pay for things like new schools, more police and fire and keeping the lights on at city hall (etc) the only override proposal that passes with consistency from community to community is sanitation. It's not a job that comes with a lot of glory but without a doubt it is one of the most important jobs in any city. They certainly have my thanks for a job well done.

And the last major event to hit the city wasn't caused by Mother Nature and it didn't affect the public but it did affect city operations, was a technology problem with our city IT infrastructure. This hit on the heels of the October Snowstorm and wasn't something we needed at that moment. But our Technology Center Staff, headed by Steve Zawada answered the call. Steve worked through the first night nonstop and tirelessly over the next few days, joined by our staff and our vendors to restore the system within a week.

I'd also like to recognize the efforts of all our volunteer staff as well. The Medical Reserve Corps who set up and manned two shelters this year. Our school and city nurses, Tina Gorman and her staff that helped our seniors get through it all and our Emergency Management Volunteers who put in countless hours storm after storm to help us get through. There's so many more to thank as well, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, the Staff at WSU and Sodexo, our neighboring communities who sent us mutual aid, the men and women of the National Guard, our Boy Scouts and church groups and the list goes on.

If I forgot anyone, I apologize.

So as we close the year that was 2011, I would like to say thank you to all our city employees for all you've done for us this year. The citizens of Westfield and I appreciate all your effort in helping us get through this tough year. Here's to a calm and sedate 2012.

We will kick January off with our city's inauguration ceremony on January 3, 2012, at 9:30 AM at Westfield Vocational Technical High School. During 2011, the school celebrated its 100th anniversary. And as we move deeper into the 21st century we are as a nation, rediscovering the importance of learning a trade in our worldwide economy. I decided to have the inauguration at the V-T not only because I think it was appropriate to highlight this hidden gem, but also because in 2012, we will spend millions of dollars of local and state money in repairing the campus. But the work doesn't end there. A recent tour of the science facilities at the school was an eye opener. There's no doubt that the skills training our students get is first rate, but over the years we have neglected the academic environment. If we as a community are serious about providing our students a first class, 21st century education, we need to invest in the facilities that will allow this learning to happen. We recently submitted a statement of interest to upgrade the science facilities at the high school.

http://www.massschoolbuildings.org/programs/science_lab

They are sorely outdated there, but the problem at the V-T is much worse. Our staff does the best it can with substandard facilities. And because you can't do the inside work until you stop the rain from coming in, (which we will do in 2012) we need to spend the next few months working on a plan to upgrade the learning facilities. Our kids deserve the best chance at success and I am committed to ensuring that happens.

With this in mind I share with you a passage from Mike Rowe, the host of Dirtiest Jobs on the Discovery Channel. He testified before the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. In his testimony he talks of our country's plight today of the skills gap.

Here's a bit of his May 11, 2011 testimony... I'm here today because of my grandfather. His name was Carl Knobel, and he made his living in Baltimore as a master electrician. He was also a plumber, a mechanic, a mason, and a carpenter. Everyone knew him as a jack-of-all-trades. I knew him as a magician.

For most of his life, my grandfather woke up clean and came home dirty. In between, he accomplished things that were nothing short of miraculous. Some days he might re-shingle a roof. Or rebuild a motor. Or maybe run electricity out to our barn. He helped build the church I went to as a kid, and the farmhouse my brothers and I grew up in. He could fix or build anything, but to my knowledge he never once read the directions. He just knew how stuff worked.

I remember one Saturday morning when I was 12. I flushed the toilet in the same way I always had. The toilet however, responded in a way that was completely out of character. There was a rumbling sound, followed by a distant gurgle. Then, everything that had gone down reappeared in a rather violent and spectacular fashion. Naturally, my grandfather was called in to investigate, and within the hour I was invited to join he and my dad in the front yard with picks and shovels.

By lunch, the lawn was littered with fragments of old pipe and mounds of dirt. There was welding and pipe-fitting, blisters and laughter, and maybe some questionable language. By sunset we were completely filthy. But a new pipe was installed, the dirt was back in the hole, and our toilet was back on its best behavior. It was one of my favorite days ever. Thirty years later in San Francisco when my toilet blew up again. This time, I didn't participate in the repair process. I just called my landlord, left a check on the kitchen counter, and went to work. When I got home, the mess was cleaned up and the problem was solved. As for the actual plumber who did the work, I never even met him.

It occurred to me that I had become disconnected from a lot of things that used to fascinate me. I no longer thought about where my food came from, or how my electricity worked, or who fixed my pipes, or who made my clothes. There was no reason to. I had become less interested in how things got made, and more interested in how things got bought. At this point my grandfather was well into his 80s, and after a long visit with him one weekend, I decided to do a TV show in his honor. Today, *Dirty Jobs* is still on the air, and I am here before this committee, hoping to say something useful. So, here it is. I believe we need a national PR Campaign for Skilled Labor. A big one. Something that addresses the widening skills gap head on, and reconnects the country with the most important part of our workforce. Right now, American manufacturing is struggling to fill 200,000 vacant positions. There are 450,000 openings in trades, transportation and utilities. The skills gap is real, and it's getting wider. In Alabama, a third of all skilled tradesmen are over 55. They're retiring fast, and no one is there to replace them.

Alabama's not alone. A few months ago in Atlanta I ran into Tom Vilsack, our Secretary of Agriculture. Tom told me about a governor who was unable to move forward on the construction of a power plant. The reason was telling. It wasn't a lack of funds. It wasn't a lack of support. It was a lack of qualified welders. In general, we're surprised that high unemployment can exist at the same time as a skilled labor shortage. We shouldn't be. We've pretty much guaranteed it.

In high schools, the vocational arts have all but vanished. We've elevated the importance of "higher education" to such a lofty perch that all other forms of knowledge are now labeled "alternative." Millions of parents and kids see apprenticeships and on-the-job-training opportunities as "vocational consolation prizes," best suited for those not cut out for a four-year degree. And still, we talk about millions of "shovel ready" jobs for a society that doesn't encourage people to pick up a shovel.

In a hundred different ways, we have slowly marginalized an entire category of critical professions, reshaping our expectations of a "good job" into something that no longer looks like work. A few years from now, an hour with a good plumber - if you can find one - is going to cost more than an hour with a good psychiatrist. At which point we'll all be in need of both. I came here today because guys like my grandfather are no less important to civilized life than they were 50 years ago. Maybe they're in short supply because we don't acknowledge them the way we used to. We leave our check on the kitchen counter, and hope the work gets done. That needs to change. The skills gap is a reflection of what we

value. To close the gap, we need to change the way the country feels about work. His full testimony can be read at...

<http://dsc.discovery.com/fansites/dirtyjobs/mike-rowe-senate-testimony.html>

and heard at...

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h_pp8CHEQ0

And lastly, if you still have brush in front of your house, call the department of public works at 572-6226. The crews are working on the north side and I assure you we will get to everyone. As always if you have any questions call or email me at 413.572.6201 or mayor@cityofwestfield.org.

Respectfully,
Dan Knapik, Mayor