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Energy and Resiliency in Cedar Falls

As we look to prepare our community for the future, we must work together to increase our energy efficiency and future-proof our home. As a community that has experienced two 500-year flood events in the past thirteen years we must be prepared for ongoing threats from severe weather and future flooding. Cedar Falls has a long history of coming together and working to help each other, I am confident we can do it again.

Updates to existing city facilities and a commitment on future facilities

The City of Cedar Falls recently presented plans for a remodel of city hall, the first major overhaul of this building in thirty years. Unfortunately, the proposed plan did not include significant updates that would increase efficiency or change the building's energy use capability. This is a missed opportunity to make a commitment to residents and city staff for what likely will be the only opportunity to do so for decades.

The city could place a short-term pause on this project, and rebid with a focus on efficiency and energy improvements. Investments in these updates will provide both a short and long-term return, reducing energy bills and providing a better working environment to attract and retain talented city staff. We are fortunate to have UNI's Center for Energy and Environmental Education, which can provide guidance on retooling this project for a lasting impact.

The city should also extend this commitment to all future facility updates and new construction. Making lasting change will require us all to work together, and the city should take the lead in demonstrating a commitment to better building practices.

Changes to building code and fee schedule

The city routinely adopts the current iteration of the international building code, matching our local code to these provisions. This ensures that buildings within the city are safe and meet basic standards. The city now has an opportunity to go a step further by adding elements to our community's building code focused on measures such as planning and design requirements, energy efficiency, water efficiency and conservation, material conservation and resource efficiency, and environmental quality. Encouraging inclusion of these provisions in plans for new buildings and renovations provides benefits to the entire community. To help with this process, the city could adopt a new permitting fee schedule with reduced costs for projects that incorporate efficiency. Working with local builders and developers, the city can design a process that is both beneficial and practical.

Hiring a full-time, dedicated staff member

In 2008, the City of Dubuque became the first city in Iowa to hire a dedicated staff member to focus on sustainability and energy efficiency in their community. Since that time, Dubuque now leads the state in their commitment and has attracted new jobs and private investment. The City of Cedar Falls has an opportunity to take the lead and help our community grow. Hiring a dedicated staff member in the Planning Department will enable a true focus on efficiency initiatives; working to update building codes, evaluating city facilities and policies, and working with the economic development division to attract new investments in our community.

Enhanced partnerships with UNI, CFU, CFCS, and BHC

Cedar Falls is fortunate to have many strong and valuable partners right here in our community, including the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls Utilities, the Cedar Falls Community School District, Black Hawk County, and many locally owned businesses. These partnerships present an opportunity to have a real impact on our ability to generate and use energy, and to share the benefits with everyone in Cedar Falls.

Working together, we can pool our expertise and resources to maximize our impact across the community. Black Hawk County already made a commitment to upgrading some of their facilities to include energy generation through solar panels. Working with all of our public partners and the private sector, we can increase our purchasing power to lower installation costs and increase the return on our investment. UNI has also made a commitment to upgrading several of their facilities, and including efficiency in future construction. The city can utilize their experience to determine the most effective ways to upgrade city facilities, and encourage other public and private partners to do the same.

In 2016, CFU, the City, the School District, and hundreds of residents partnered together to create the largest community solar project in Iowa, generating 1.5 MW of power. This was an opportunity to improve our local energy generation capability, and receive a long-term return. Now that we've seen how this model can work, let's replicate this success to expand our energy generation capability. In addition to increases in efficiency, further diversifying our energy portfolio will help reduce our exposure to other markets that may be impacted by outside forces.

New incentive structure for private investment

Under current city code, certain types of new construction are eligible for tax increment financing (TIF), which provides a tax abatement (reduction) on the property taxes associated with a new project for a period of five years. TIF is one of the most effective economic development tools for cities across the state.

TIF could also be used to attract new projects with a focus on sustainability and efficiency. A five-year additional TIF extension on the total cost of a project dedicated to energy efficiency and use would enable businesses and residents to manage the upfront cost of a project and attract lenders to help finance new projects, while avoiding a substantial budgetary burden to the city.

Emergency fund

The 2016 flood required a community-wide response, with hundreds of volunteers and city staff working around the clock. We also used dozens of pieces of city equipment, initiated emergency contracts with private entities to carry sand and provide supplies, and conducted several rescue operations. When the water receded, the City of Cedar Falls requested disaster relief funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help cover the costs of our emergency response. Requesting funding from FEMA has always been a challenging process, requiring reams of paperwork and hundreds of staff hours. During our application process, we heard from staff in Washington that FEMA's disaster relief fund was already overleveraged from a worse than expected hurricane season. While the city did eventually receive federal funding, it was clear that this financial risk would not go away. Our city would face disaster events again, and FEMA would continue to be stretched thin by increasing risks around the country.

During the next City Council goal setting session, I advocated strongly for establishing a dedicated emergency fund within the city's annual budget. This fund would be able to finance future emergency operations, ensuring that Cedar Falls residents would be protected, even without federal assistance. I fought for a \$2 million dollar fund, based on the costs of the 2016 flood. Working with the other members of City Council, we created a \$1.5 million dollar fund. Our next steps should be increasing the fund balance to \$2 million, and establishing a mechanism for replenishing the fund after an emergency response. As Mayor, I will work with Council to finish this process and ensure we are ready to keep residents safe, no matter what we face next.

Serving on the city's Resiliency Planning Committee, I've seen the talent and commitment we have dedicated to this effort across our community. It's time for the city to make a real commitment in this effort, helping ensure a bright, efficient, and successful future for Cedar Falls.

