CommUNITY Connection

United in Service to our Community:
Butler Township, City of Vandalia, Vandalia Butler City Schools

Volume 1, Issue 1, Fall 2020

Putting the 'UNITY' in 'Community'

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "community" as "a unified body of individuals, such as people with common interests living in a particular area."

This definition perfectly sums up the reason for launching this new, twice-yearly newsletter, CommUNITY Connection. Although we all have our own lifestyles, preferences and beliefs, people living in the Vandalia-Butler community generally share traditional values: We want residents to live well, children to thrive, neighborhoods and commercial areas to be safe and businesses to succeed.

It's with this notion in mind that the leaders of the City of Vandalia, Butler Township and the Vandalia-Butler City School District came together in a spirit of collaboration – a rare commodity in today's competitive climate – to provide news and information of common interest across our borders.

We hope you enjoy this publication and welcome your comments, questions and suggestions for future editions.

Helke students using the tent for outdoor learning and reading time.

Tents Expand Classroom Space

The school year for Vandalia Butler students is officially underway, but in some areas, it looks different this year. To help create a safe learning environment for students during this unprecedented time, the District has installed outdoor tents at four school buildings: Morton Middle School, Smith Middle School, Demmitt Elementary and Helke Elementary.

Each tent provides an additional 1,800 square feet of space for staff and students to utilize during the school day. Classes take turns using the tents, providing students a change of environment, more space for social distancing and extra mask breaks. The space can also be used for choir, band, other extended classroom space, line up on rainy mornings and even for outdoor staff meetings.

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Adapting to Covid-19:
Leaders Thank Community for Support

Covid-19 has changed the way public organizations operate in order to keep everyone healthy and safe. For this article, we've asked School Superintendent Robert O'Leary, Interim City Manager Kurt Althouse and Township Administrator Erika Vogel to explain the changes.

Superintendent Robert O'Leary

Interim City Manager Kurt Althouse

Township Administrator Erika Vogel

What operational changes has your organization made in response to the pandemic?

O'Leary: We've increased hand sanitation in all buildings and installed Plexiglas barriers in classrooms, lunch lines, offices and elsewhere. We have extended lunch periods and added spaces for lunch seating. Our gymnasiums, lecture halls and theatre accommodate larger groups, and we're also using rented tents (see "Tents" on page 1). We also purchased an online remote program for students to learn from home.

Althouse: Early on, we quickly closed public facilities and then reopened some, following State directives. Also, when social distancing isn't possible, staff and public meetings are held via Zoom, which we'll continue for the foreseeable future

Vogel: We've installed a sanitizer station and protective glass in our office lobby. Only two people are allowed at a time, and masks are required. For first responders, we try to minimize exposure and require PPE use on all calls and transports. We've also increased cleaning and disinfecting and employees have daily temperature checks.

What should residents know about doing business with you during this time?

O'Leary: We are back to normal operations but with many changes. We're limiting the number of volunteers and visitors in buildings as well as visitor hours. We're promoting online cashless payments for fees, lunches and other expenses. We've also had to limit spectators at sports and activities.

Althouse: We are working hard to keep necessary services open and available, while adapting to restrictions. We also require face coverings and social distancing in our facilities.

Vogel: We have tried to provide service to residents electronically as much as possible, including permit applications and forms. We encourage residents to call rather than come in person, although the lobby is open during business hours.

City's Strategies Reduce Truck Traffic

Area residents frustrated with truck traffic using the National Road business corridor to access destinations west of Airport Access Road will welcome the findings of an Ohio Department of Transportation study. Traffic has decreased from a daily volume of 829 large commercial vehicles in 2016 to 626 in 2019 – despite the construction of multiple warehouse/distribution centers near the airport.

Vandalia has employed three key strategies to address the issue:

First, large trucks have been prohibited from turning right onto National Road from North Dixie Drive.

Second, Vandalia police officers have been trained in commercial vehicle safety enforcement.

Third, the City has asked businesses to encourage drivers to use the Airport Access Road to reach areas west of the business corridor.

"We've been pleased with their cooperation," said Amber Holloway, assistant city manager.

Michael Spirk, CIT Program Mental Health Counselor

Mental Health Resources Ease Pressures on Law Enforcement

The City of Vandalia and Butler Township have been piloting a collaborative program this year that provides a new resource for police officers and individuals experiencing a mental health crisis.

Through the Mobile Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), the two communities share the services of a mental health counselor, who responds on police calls to assist officers and individuals or families facing mental illness issues.

"It could be someone who needs assistance in a domestic situation, struggling with a drug addiction or substance abuse, or dealing with mental illness in their family," said Vandalia Police Chief Kurt Althouse.

The counselor, Michael Spirk, is a mental health professional employed by South Community and licensed in the state of Ohio.

"We want to reduce police time spent on calls that are better resolved by mental health resources," said Butler Township Police Chief John Porter.

Spirk's salary is funded by a grant from the Montgomery County Alcohol Drug Addiction Mental Health Services (ADMHS) Board. When the one-year pilot is completed, the Board, Vandalia and Butler Township will determine if the program should be continued.

Board Authorizes School Building Sale

Over the summer, the Vandalia-Butler City School's Board of Education authorized the sale of the former Murlin Heights Elementary property at public auction and subsequently, at private sale, if necessary. The property consists of about 25 acres located at 8515 N. Dixie Dr. The minimum bid set for the property was $1.27 million.

The public auction was unattended, so the District is discussing next steps.

Changes Coming for Busy Intersection

Trips to the grocery store will soon be less stressful. The City of Vandalia has awarded the contract for work designed to relieve congestion at the intersection of Northwoods Boulevard and Falls Creek Drive. The project involves widening the road from I-75 to the Kroger entrance, and installation of a traffic signal at the store entrance.

"Those who shop here know that in peak hours, it can be very difficult to get out of the lot, especially turning left onto Northwoods Boulevard from Kroger's," said Vandalia Public Service Director Rob Cron.

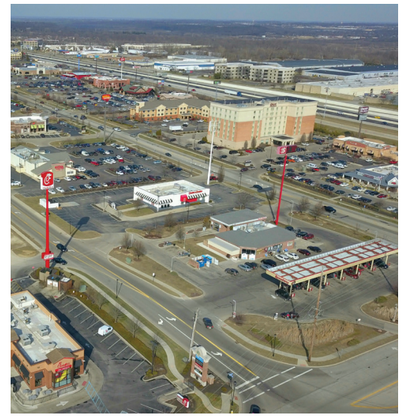
The Ohio Public Works Commission awarded Vandalia a $400,000 grant for this $600,000 project.

Improvements will reduce traffic issues around the Kroger entrance.

Facelift in Store for Business District

Rebranding and several improvements will soon be coming to the Benchwood/Miller Lane business district:

- Fairfield Inn and Suites and Holiday Inn Express are coming online, bringing the total number of hotels in the Township to 16, for a total of 1,580 rooms. These hotels generate $800,000 annually in Lodging Tax.
- City Barbeque purchased the former Steak 'N' Shake on Miller Lane and will be opening soon.
- Butler Township and RTA have agreed to move the Towne Center Drive bus stop currently in front of Home 2 Suites. The new location will be the parking lot at the south end of the Wal-Mart building.
- The Township has used a Montgomery County grant to purchase new trash and recycling receptacles for the business district.
- An engineering consultant is helping the Township conduct a business district study for enhancements to the traffic flow, safety and streetscape. Any projects undertaken will be funded with grants or funds generated from within the district. "This is a priority," said Township Administrator Erika Vogel. "It's a gateway to the Vandalia-Butler community."



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What's On

Although many popular community events had to be cancelled this year, we look forward to bringing them back in 2021. Here are some highlights for the coming year:

Star Spangled Celebration at Vandalia Recreation Center
(City- and Township-sponsored)
July 3, 2021

Butler Township National Night Out at StoneSpring Nursing Home
August 3, 2021

Vandalia National Night Out at Vandalia Sports Complex
August 3, 2021

Butler Township Party in the Park at Art Van Atta Park
October 9, 2021

Trick-or-Treat

Beggars' Night in the Vandalia-Butler area will be held Oct. 31 from 6-8 p.m. Please be sure to practice social distancing, bring hand sanitizer and stay home if you or your child is sick.

Food Pantry Drive: The Need is Great

It's not too late to make your donation to the Vandalia-Butler Food Pantry's annual food drive. Because large groups of volunteers cannot gather to sort food items due to health restrictions, officials request only monetary donations.

Won't you help feed the people of our community? The need is greater than ever.

Please send your donation to:
The Vandalia-Butler Food Pantry
345 James Bohanan
Vandalia, OH 45377

Food drives pre-Covid-19, when volunteers could gather to help.