

## News

# A man of sacrifice and service

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Published: Tuesday, December 5, 2006 2:00 AM CST

Grand Island Mayor Jay Vavricek said the last five years -- a year spent campaigning for mayor and four years serving in the post -- have meant sacrifice.

"My entire life and business life have been compromised with elected public service as mayor -- no question," the mayor said last week.

His term will officially end following the delivery of his final State of the City address at the Grand Island City Council meeting tonight -- the mayor's 187th public meeting.

"There are certain things you do at the expense of your family and the expense of your business -- whether it be time, energy. Sure, that just goes with it," Vavricek said. "It's reality."

But it's a sacrifice worth taking, he said.

"I've enjoyed service. I thought it was a unique opportunity and an opportunity of a lifetime," Vavricek said. "As mayor, you get a unique opportunity to share other people's lives.

"When you're asked to go ahead and attend funerals of fallen Marines, fallen seamen, stand by governors in prayer, stand beside congressmen singing 'God Bless America' ... it just shows you that this office ... is a lot more than just streets and phone calls," Vavricek said.

His eyes began to well with tears.

"I've gotten to know a lot of neat people with those relationships that I would not have had the chance unless you serve. And that's why people need to serve because you enrich your life in a way you wouldn't if you weren't serving," the mayor said with emotion as he turned and looked away for a few seconds.

### Projects completed

Vavricek outlined his service -- from Dec. 3, 2002, to Dec. 5, 2006 -- during a driving tour of changes in Grand Island.

He drove down South Locust Street in his Chevrolet Tahoe to look at major projects that were started by previous administrations and leaders but completed during his watch.

Among them were the Interstate 80/South Locust interchange, the South Locust Street redevelopment and the Wood River flood diversion project.

All are important. All are marks of public support, Vavricek said. And all are evidence that progress takes time.

Coming back up South Locust into Grand Island, Vavricek turned his SUV into Fonner Park and pulled up alongside the Heartland Events Center.

The center solidifies southeast Grand Island as the entertainment area of the city, he said, and should set the stage for economic development, quality-of-life improvements and potential sales tax revenue well into the future.

Before leaving the center's parking lot, Vavricek paused to answer his cell phone -- a characteristic of a mayor who pledged open communication with his constituency.

He grabbed the pen he keeps on his dash and started jotting notes on the tablet he keeps on the vehicle's console. His mini office has motored to code compliance calls, to view street requests and to serve as a mobile command post during Grand Island's 2005 flood.

Vavricek had to respond to a lot of environmental issues -- wastewater treatment plant odors, water contamination, the flood of 2005 and last March's record snowfall.

#### Progress on others

The second mark of change Vavricek outlined was projects that were advanced during his tenure but will be completed under another mayor's watch.

He drove past the construction site for the new Fire Station No. 1, a project discussed when he filed for city council more than a decade ago. He drove past the library and then out to the quickly growing Highway 281 -- where commercial outlets and new neighborhoods sprout almost as quickly as the starling flocks grow.

The library expansion, the new Law Enforcement Center and the new Fire Station No. 1, all of which are to open in 2007, were given life through the half-cent sales-tax increase voters approved in May 2004. Improvements at the Grand Generation Center, also funded by the sales tax, are already done.

That half-cent sales-tax increase is also helping decrease dependency on property taxes -- what Vavricek calls "the legacy of growth." New construction creates new property valuation to help the city population in total shoulder more services.

The half-cent sales tax also helped give a permanent revenue source for the voter-approved Local Option Municipal Economic Development Fund, or LB840 program, which the city and Vavricek supported in 2003.

The creation of that fund, which has \$750,000 annually earmarked for economic projects, opened the door for business incentives and more input and involvement for citizens, Vavricek said.

LB840 helped close the deal for expanding CNH, helping CXT, breaking ground for Standard Iron and assisting Heritage Disposal.

#### Choppers to chambers

The economic incentive plan wasn't yet in place when Grand Island landed its bid to be home for the Nebraska National Guard helicopter base.

Vavricek still has the original phone message from the National Guard -- which came 10 days after he took office -- mentioning the helicopter base.

He remembers waiting about an hour to return the call to Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke, who then asked if Grand Island would like to be considered for the aviation facility.

"I said, 'I think we might be interested,'" Vavricek recalled saying in a professional demeanor.

Then he just busts out laughing, still excited and pleased with how the community came together to win that bid. Groundbreaking for the facility is set for spring 2007.

Vavricek has tried to improve the little things, too -- adding a city logo to the council podium, which is evident on taped meetings of the council aired on GITV. He added a big screen in the council chambers so the audience can see the front of a presenter instead of just the back.

Next to the Diet Dr Pepper he sips during council meetings, Vavricek has a small video monitor to watch what is aired on GITV. It helps him know when to ask the camera operators to focus in on maps, photos or PowerPoint presentations that presenters bring forward.

It's all part of the communication plan -- an effort to keep city residents better informed of city government.

"The reason I got involved in elected public service is, if you have less-than-positive leadership, it can hold you back. ... The leadership has come forward in our entire community the last 15 years and has propelled us to the great things we're enjoying today," Vavricek said.

Bright times ahead

He thinks those great things will continue. He's highly optimistic about Grand Island's future.

There's strong municipal leadership, he said. Every school system has grown and had physical improvements -- Northwest, Central Catholic, Heartland Lutheran and Grand Island public.

As Vavricek continued the driving tour, he headed out to the new Westridge Middle School site. He pulled in and watched construction a bit.

School issues -- every issue -- is important as mayor, he said.

"As mayor, you try to look at the big picture and try to be aware of all the different things going on -- so you don't compromise them and also help promote. I think the mayor is a huge promoter -- not only to land jobs and close deals but to set the tone for a community," he said.

He tackled some tough issues -- the firing of longtime Emergency Management Director Howard Maxon, water contamination, odors, starlings, the laying off of three administrative staff members. Employment issues are the most stressful, he said, noting that a new evaluation has been created for all city employees.

Vavricek believes some issues are solved.

"I think we've largely addressed the odor issues," he said.

Vavricek said he hopes his desire for more redevelopment areas will carry over into the next administration. Study of the process is just now under way.

In parting advice to incoming elected leaders, Vavricek said two things.

"Public safety is important," he said. "And as soon as you take the oath, be prepared -- be prepared."

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