



# Villa Grove News



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## City Projects are Making Villa Grove Great Again

**By Amy Rose Staff Writer**  
A lot of changes and improvements have been happening in Villa Grove. Mayor Cassandra Eversole-Gunter and City Administrator Jacki Athey recently provided some more details on completed projects and several that are just getting started, along with some other changes in the city that residents may not know.

**Water Plant Completed**  
Residents should be noticing a big improvement in their water quality, since the new water plant has been activated. It took a few for the output of the new plant to run through the system, but with the completion of that process residents will enjoy better tasting water and water that will be easier on your water appliances. The new modern scrubber processing will eliminate the lime build up that Villa Grove residents have struggled with and it will also eliminate the "rotten egg" smell that commonly filled the air near the old water plant. Another improvement to the water system includes a built in water softener step before the water leaves the water plant.

The construction was funded with an Environmental Protection Agency loan at 1.3% interest. However, the mayor reported that the city received a \$500,000 loan forgiveness from the EPA because the project was efficiently managed and was completed by the deadline. After the project was handed off to the engineering firm of Fehr-Graham, it took about two years for the building to be completed.

**City Office Moves and Building changes**  
With the completion of the new water plant, the city administrative offices were moved to the new building at 120 North Main Street on May 20th. Athey and the other office staff members will now be located at this address, therefore water bills will no longer be accepted at the city building on Front Street. Starting in June, water bills can be conveniently dropped off at the new drive-up drop box located along Jefferson Street. An accessible entrance is available on the west side of the building, for those needing it.

The mayor's office will still be located at the city building at 612 Front Street. The mayor does not have set office hours, so with the moving of the other office staff, she would like to remind residents she

is available by appointment for meetings.

The city council chambers will be moved into the former office space area at the Front Street location. This will free up more space in the Senior Center for new activities. This will also be the site of the Douglas County Health Summer Meals program for youth under 18 in Villa Grove. Breakfast and Lunch will be available during June and July for those qualifying for the program.

**Streetscape Project**  
A new project that is just getting started is the replacement of the street lamps on Main Street. Eventually, all of the lighting will look like the new posts and lamps that have been installed near the water plant. This is a part of the new five-year plan developed with the TIF consultant. The first step is to remove the old posts and replace them with new wooden posts and LED lighting. The mayor emphasizes that this is only a temporary solution. Ameren is doing this phase at no charge to the city. The old lighting could not be replaced or repaired by Ameren. This phase will be completed per Ameren's availability to provide the labor. Underground wiring will need to be installed before the new permanent lights are installed. Unfortunately, this means tearing up the sidewalks downtown. "It is going to be a big job and take a long time to complete, but it will look really nice when it is done," Eversole-Gunter said. The new lighting will also result in savings on electric bills for the city.

**Bridge Replacement**  
City Administration has been working with IDOT to begin the process of replacing the bridge on Route 130 by the school. Fehr-Graham, the engineering firm that worked on the water plant, has been approved by IDOT to handle the construction plans for the bridge. Bid request packages for the bridge construction will be released in the Fall of 2019, with construction to start in Spring of 2020.

One major sticking point as been discussions over who will pay for the relocation of water lines that run under the bridge and that will need to be moved. Athey said that the city is still negotiating the specifics of where and how to move the water lines, but it has been agreed upon that the city and the state will split the cost involved with moving the pipes.

During construction, the bridge will have one lane traffic available. It will not be a full closure of the bridge and construction is expected to last through two construction seasons, depending on the weather.

**City Staff and Finances**  
In the fall of 2018, the mayor and city council created the position of City Administrator. Jacki Athey was appointed to that position. According to the website, the position functions as a personnel officer, purchasing/procurement officer and budget officer. They also prepare reports for the mayor and city council, represents the city in all facets of grant research, solicitation and administration of such programs. They are also the city's liaison to other agencies and organizations. Eversole-Gunter said adding Athey as the city administrator has been a stabilizing factor in the city government. "Elected officials change, but the administrator provides a constant source of experience and knowledge," she added.

Athey, who is also the city treasurer, reports that the city finances are stable and have responsibly planned for the expense of all the projects being undertaken by the city. They have also been actively seeking financial resources that will help to fund future projects being discussed. Eversole-Gunter added, "The council and city management have been focused on addressing maintenance and infrastructure projects as finances allow."

Changes in the personnel at the water plant has been evolving also. Steve Duke has announced his retirement, but continues to act as a part-time consultant as Scott Arbuckle is taking over. Arbuckle is currently the LOIC (Local Operator in Charge) and has a class B Operator license for the water operation. He is pursuing his waste water license to become fully qualified.

**Volunteers Make a Difference**

The mayor also noted that the recent increase in volunteer involvement and monetary donations regarding city projects have really made a difference in keeping the funding costs down. "We have been very grateful for the volunteer support the last few years," Eversole-Gunter said. "Our volunteer base is incredible." The Beautify Villa Grove Committee has been a big help for community improvement projects, along



Mayor Cassandra Eversole-Gunter and City Administrator Jacki Athey are excited about city improvements. Photo provided by Cassandra Eversole-Gunter

with individuals volunteering their time and skills. There has also been a great response to helping with new community events, such as the Christmas tree lighting and the fall festival.

**Main Street Plaza**

One project that relied heavily on donations and volunteer labor is the new arts and entertainment venue on Main Street. The project was complete with 100% of the money donated by local businesses and using only volunteer labor. The work crew was led by Bill Koss and his expert construction abilities. The area includes a permanent wooden stage with electrical wiring, security fencing and tables and chairs available. Future improvements will include more landscaping and pavers added.

The grand opening of the area hosted the Cinco de Mayo celebration on May 5. It included live music, dancing, drink vendors and open air seating across the street at El Rancho Grande. "It was a great community gathering," Eversole-Gunter said. Future events being planned are an Alumni dance for this Alumni weekend and entertainment for Ag Days. The mayor added, "this will be an attraction to the city and will bring in more people to support our local business."

Plans are being discussed to allow the public to lease the area for their own events, if they have proof of proper insurance coverage. Details are still in development as to how that will work.

**City Recreation Program and Parks**

What used to be referred to as Summer Rec, is now more simply the City Rec-

reation Program because it entails activities for all ages throughout the year. Heath Wilson is the new Director of the Recreation program and Steve Douglas will be in charge of the concessions. The recreation program currently offers youth leagues for baseball, softball, t-ball, basketball, soccer and flag-football. It has also added two adult leagues for dodge ball and whiffle ball.

The park youth program, Summer Dayz, is still headed up by Lee and Sharon Hoffman. This program offers recreational opportunities at Henson park for Villa Grove youth during the summer for a small fee. The kids play games, do crafts, enjoy inflatables and water fun days. Contact city hall if you are interested in more information on these programs.

The BVG committee has hosted several workdays in the city parks and recreation facilities over the last couple of years. Another beautification project is being headed up by volunteer J.C. Crawford and the Lions club. They are working together to paint the caboose in Henson Park this summer. It will be nice to see it shining again.

Richman Park will be the site of the Celebrating Freedom Festival again this year on Sunday, July 7. There will be live music, vendors, concessions and kids activities prior to the fireworks at dusk.

Eversole-Gunter and Athey say there are many more projects in the works that they aren't ready to discuss the details publicly yet, but expect more improvements as the City Administration and staff work towards the future.

## Capital Recap: Abortion Bill; Capital Plan, Snap Decision

**ABORTION BILL:** A measure that would rewrite Illinois' abortion statute — the subject of months-long debate among advocates on both sides but not lawmakers — is moving out of legislative limbo after months of inaction.

The House Democratic caucus met for about two hours Wednesday, in part to discuss the Reproductive Health Act, a bill backers and detractors agree would be the most progressive reproductive health care law in the country if enacted. The meeting was a chance for representatives to ask pointed questions about the legislation.

Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, concluded the session by "making clear that they were going to find us a new vehicle for the bill" and it would be assigned to a committee in the coming days, Rep. Kelly Cassidy, also from Chicago, said.

Neither Cassidy, the measure's sponsor, nor Madigan's spokesperson would comment on what questions legislators asked during the caucus's meeting. But Cassidy said overall, the conversation went well. "There are folks who don't want to do it, but by and large

there were some really amazing statements of support, there were some really thoughtful questions, and there were some folks who just simply, in all of the rush and all of the things that are swirling around the capital, haven't had time to focus on what's in this bill," Cassidy said.

She said particularly because the bill had been held in committee and was not allowed to be discussed, "this opportunity for folks to get their questions answered was really important."

When Cassidy introduced the Reproductive Health Act in February, it received much attention from proponents and opponents. But the bill was almost immediately sidelined from debate in the same subcommittee as the other roughly 10 reproductive health care and abortion-related measures introduced this session by the panel's chairwoman, Chicago Rep. Frances Ann Hurlay.

**PRITZKER'S CAPITAL PLAN:** DEMOCRATIC Gov. J.B. Pritzker on Friday, May 17, briefed lawmakers on a proposed capital improvements plan that calls for spending \$41.5 billion on transportation, education, public health and



Women dressed as Handmaids, characters from Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, "The Handmaid's Tale," stand by as House Democrats meet on the other side of the door to discuss the future of the Reproductive Health Act on Wednesday at the Capitol in Springfield. (Capitol News Illinois photo by Rebecca Anzel)

other infrastructure projects over six years, funded by a host of new or increased taxes and fees.

The proposal, which officials say represents only a "preliminary draft" of what a final capital bill could look like, was shared with legislative leaders early Friday. A copy was obtained by Capitol News Illinois.

"As a result of working group sessions with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle from both chambers of the General Assembly, the administration is

working on a preliminary draft of a comprehensive capital plan that will put 540,000 Illinois-ans back to work and finally fix our crumbling infrastructure," Pritzker's press secretary, Jordan Abudayyeh, said in a statement after several news organizations had obtained the document. "The administration looks forward to continuing to engaging in productive conversations before the proposal is finalized."

The program, which the administration is branding as "Re-

build Illinois," would combine \$17.8 billion in new bonds with \$10 billion in federal funding; \$7 billion in current, ongoing state revenues; and \$6.6 billion in local government revenues and private sources of funding.

The bulk of the spending — about \$28.6 billion, or 69 percent — would be earmarked for transportation projects, including roads and bridges, mass transit, rail and aviation.

Among the major projects listed in the draft plan are \$1 billion to improve a portion of Interstate 80 in Will County; \$135.4 million to reconstruct the interchange between Interstate 55 and Interstate 72 south of Springfield; and \$61.2 million for improvements to a stretch of U.S. Highway 40 that runs through Effingham.

The draft also calls for \$5.9 billion, or 14 percent of the total, in spending on education buildings, including \$2.4 billion for college and university campuses and \$3.5 billion for preK-12 schools.

The rest of the funding would go toward improving state facilities, environmental conservation projects, broadband deployment, health care and human services projects such as construc-

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