



# “We’re Still Here; And We’re Here to Help”

By Michael Stein

Whether it’s Boston, Biloxi or Barnesville, the year 2020 served up a gamut of challenges for law enforcement.

In his 31 years in the field, Barnesville Police Chief Dean Ernst said he’s never seen anything like what his department had to deal with over the past year. But, despite the circumstances, Ernst said, “We’re still here to serve the community.”

In working within a national landscape scarred by a pandemic, riots and situations like the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Ernst said one of his first priorities was to make sure everyone in the department was on the same page philosophically.

“In looking back at what occurred a year ago, one of the first things we dealt with was the uncertainty,” Ernst said. “This was something so new to us that even the experts didn’t know what we were dealing with. So we had something of a learning curve. Along with other first responders, we were in a much different position than a private business. We can’t tell people we’re not going to be there for them, so we had to figure out a way to keep the public and our staff safe, but also be able to do the job.”

Conversely, the public had that same level of uncertainty in dealing with service providers.

“The public didn’t know how we were going to be able to interact with them,” Ernst said. “Adding everything else that was going on in the nation with regard to law enforcement, the timing couldn’t have been worse.”

Ernst said the Barnesville Police Department takes great pride in being proactive in its relations with the community. Those opportunities were very limited last year.

“There are normally a lot of things we do to prevent crime and promote relations, but that involved a level of action with community groups that we no longer had last year,” Ernst said. “We didn’t have the fair, we didn’t have Potato Days; we didn’t have the community picnic. Our interaction with the community was a whole lot different. For instance, if I’m on patrol and see someone shoveling their driveway, I might pull up and have a friendly conversation. But I no longer felt I could do that because I didn’t want them to feel uncomfortable or at risk with social contact.”

## Pandemic disrupted proactive approach to law enforcement

Through the end of 2019, Ernst said his department had made great strides in providing a high level of service to the community as well as mutual trust.

## Ernst Retiring; Beattie Takes Deputy Position

As this issue of Streetlight was being prepared, two significant events in the Barnesville Police Department occurred. Chief Dean Ernst will be stepping down from his position and Officer Ryan Beattie will also be leaving the department.

“I have been doing some calculations, making decisions, and I have decided to retire from my Police Chief position effective May 22, 2021,” Ernst said. “I feel that I have brought our department to a position that will leave our department in a good place for the future and I feel that it is time for me to conclude a productive career.”

Officer Ryan Beattie has also submitted his resignation and accepted a new position as a deputy sheriff with the Wilkin County Sheriff’s Office. His last day was March 26, 2021.



The Barnesville Police Department as of March 22, 2021. From left Officer Mark Pearson, Officer Ryan Beattie, Chief Dean Ernst, Administrative Assistant Shannon Jablonsky, Officer Chris Olson, Officer Jesse Atteberry, and School Resource Officer Jeff Tharaldson. Beattie has since joined the Wilkin County Sheriff’s Department.

“Last year I feel we took a step back in time to a point where we were more reactive than proactive. I felt we had lost the momentum we had built up. We had so many good things going for us, and now it seemed like we had to re-invent the wheel. Through it all I wanted to make sure people knew we were going to be there for them, even though it might look a little different.”

While some entities shut down or conducted business online, Ernst said, “We didn’t have a choice. And with everything going on nationally regarding law enforcement, there were some obstacles. Maybe some of the trust level was down, so we lost that momentum as well. People stayed home and spent more time watching and listening to the news media, which I have nothing against. But there is bias in the media, and it doesn’t necessarily paint an accurate picture of law enforcement.”

Ernst said his department did see a lower call volume last year. The reasons behind that aren’t crystal clear, except that people’s lives were “flipped upside down.” They weren’t reaching out to us the same way, and in some cases maybe things took care of themselves.”

## Virus directly affects department staff

The Barnesville PD was directly affected by the pandemic as two officers tested positive for the virus. Neither case was severe enough to cause a long separation.

“With one guy sick, that’s 20 percent of our department,” Ernst said. “With two that’s 40 percent, which is a huge number for us. But we were able to get through

it. Really, everyone has known someone who was affected by the virus, so it’s crossing all parts of life. I think we’ve been responsible in our interactions in order to keep our officers safe and also keep people we deal with safe.”

Keeping those core police services intact has been a balancing act for Ernst and his staff.

“We’ve all had to figure out a way to adapt,” he said. “We still have to remain vigilant. We’ve been doing things differently with fewer interactions as we try to live with this situation. But I want people to know we’re still here. We want people to reach out to us if they need help. It’s like doctors telling us not to disregard our health. Don’t let things fester and get worse. And that can

happen in law enforcement if people let things go. Don’t live with that uncertainty if there’s something we can do to help.”

The pandemic has affected people in different ways. Families and couples have been together more, and that can be a positive or a negative.

“Even those who are healthy and can get around may struggle with this because they need that human interaction. Sometimes it can lead to being our problem.”

## Slowly getting back to the basics of community policing

Today, as vaccines are being rolled out and at least the more serious cases of the virus are declining, Ernst said he’s hopeful for

a return to more of a normal.

“We want to get back to doing what we do and keep this community safe,” Ernst said. “A community cannot take care of itself. We have to have that level of interaction because community safety is truly a team effort, and we’re just a cog in the wheel. This pandemic has caused a kind of disconnect. In order to get back to normal we need to get that wheel rolling again.”

Even without the coronavirus, the ongoing narratives surrounding law enforcement in the country have created challenges even for a department in a town the size of Barnesville.

“Hopefully, people don’t take what they see in the news as a reflection of reality everywhere,” Ernst said. “Maybe it’s a small snapshot, but there are a lot of good people in law enforcement doing good things. Now is a time when everybody needs to support and reach out to each other.”

“I don’t want people to think it’s us against them. Law enforcement can’t be an entity without the community support because it really is a partnership. We don’t want to have to be the ‘bad guys’ all the time. We want to be the good guys and build those relationships and create trust so when a situation arises where we have to be the bad guys, people know we’re just doing our jobs.”

As for 2021 and beyond, Ernst is hopeful for at least a “new normal” as COVID cases stabilize and vaccine rates increase.

“Personally, I’ve always tried to respect how serious this virus is,” Ernst said. “So I hope people don’t become too complacent. But I also don’t think people should live in fear. We know we still have an uncertain

year ahead and we are going to try and remain flexible because the situation can change quickly.”

Community relations will continue for Chief Ernst and his officers and staff.

“Building that relationship and trust with those we serve is important in all our daily calls,” he said. “I don’t want us to lose that. Barnesville really has a lot of good things going for it. I’m glad to be a part of this community and be a cog in the wheel.”

As someone who grew up in Barnesville, Ernst said he feels more of a vested interest in serving the community.

“It’s important to me that Barnesville stays a safe community. I think people see that, and maybe more will see that and want to move here.”

## A wealth of experience within the department

Along with Chief Ernst and 31 years of experience, other officers that have been serving on the Barnesville Police Department, and their years of law enforcement service, are:

- Mark Pearson, 24 years
- Chris Olson, 23 years
- Jeff Tharaldson (School Resource Officer), 18 years
- Ryan Beattie, 14 years
- Jesse Atteberry, 3.5 years (although he has previous non-patrol law enforcement experience)

“We all want this department to keep moving forward,” Ernst said. “I think we have a recipe that’s working and we have a lot of good things going for us to continue to maintain that level of service and progress.”

## Construction Project Is A Long, Winding Road

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on the wrestling and weight rooms to make room for the new kitchen area.

The estimated completion time for the new gymnasium, auditorium and high school commons area is December 2021.

On what had been a parking lot on the northeast corner of the high school, which is where the current shop area is located, fencing has been installed around what will be the new ag shop.

What may be one of the most interesting facets of the entire project takes place this summer: the construction of an elevated walkway from the elementary school to the new middle block addition.

According to the project construction manager, Don Emslander of R.A. Morton, the metal and glass walkway will be fabricated by the contractor and shipped to Barnesville in three or four pieces.

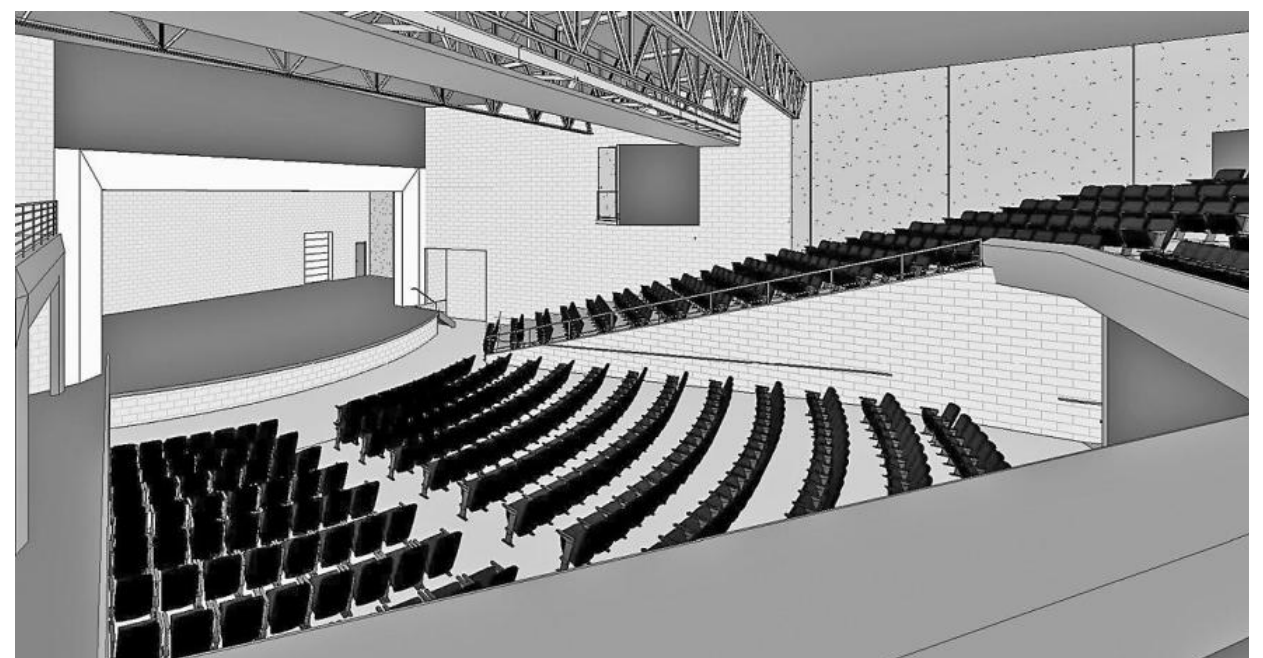
The walkway is expected to be completed in time for the 2021-22 school year.

Getting to this point has been a long, arduous process. Hundreds of hours of planning and discussion and three elections are now part of the district’s history.

The new gymnasium, auditorium, elementary classroom addition and many other improvements to existing spaces stand as a testament to the community’s commitment to its students for decades to come.



Architect’s rendition of the high school entry, commons area, gym and auditorium looking southwest to northeast.



Rendition of the auditorium looking from the balcony to the stage, which is on the east side of the complex.



Rendition of the new gymnasium, including the elevated walking track around the court.

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