Coming to fruition: county projects happening soon

By AMANDA KELLER

Our hometown Royals were crowned the 2015 World Series Champions, Johnson County celebrated its 160th anniversary and Oxford English Dictionaries selected an emoji as its 2015 word of the year. It was an exciting year.

Johnson County residents have many reasons to be enthusiastic about our community as we kick off the new year. Several county projects that have been in the works for many years are coming to fruition in the coming months.

Some elements of these projects were made possible through adoption of the fiscal year 2016 budget last August, which included a mill levy increase of 3.3 mills. A mill equates to one dollar of property taxes per $1,000 of taxable value.

The impact on the average Johnson County homeowner was approximately $8.26 a month for individuals with a $261,000 home, which is the average home value in the county.

This was the first mill levy increase for Johnson County residents in a decade. About half of the increase will be used to maintain current levels of county services, while the other half will fund parks, library and transit projects.

Let’s have a closer look!

The “new” King Louie: Johnson County Arts and Heritage Center

Over the last few years, many residents have wondered what the future holds for the iconic King Louie building at 8788 Metcalf in Overland Park.

The facility, owned and operated by a private company as a bowling alley and ice skating rink for many years, was vacated in 2009. Johnson County Government purchased the building in 2011 as a future replacement home for the Johnson County Museum.

After extensive study, planning and public input, plans to refurbish the King Louie building into the new Johnson County Arts and Heritage Center are making major strides. Construction officially breaks ground on Jan. 14.

The building is expected to be substantially complete by the first quarter of 2017, with a JCAHC grand opening tentatively scheduled for April of the same year.

New home for Johnson County Museum

The museum’s holdings currently include more than one million photographs, 18,000 3-D artifacts and 300 cubic feet of archival material. Relocating the museum into the JCAHC facility will allow more space for an even greater number of exhibits and artifacts, to the benefit of museum patrons.

“At the Johnson County Museum, we’re most excited about the opportunity to be more visible to the community so we can better meet our mission of connecting people with the shared experiences and the heritage of our community. Our goal is to help visitors develop a deeper understanding and sense of place, especially for our young residents,” said Johnson County Museum Executive Director Mindi Love.

Many residents have fond memories of the King Louie ice rink, which will soon contain the 1950s All-Electric House, helping to preserve the relic and allowing patrons easier access during inclement weather.

The house is tentatively scheduled for relocation from its current home in Shawnee to the former King Louie building in February 2016.
Other arts and cultural uses
The new JCAHC facility will also include space for multiple Johnson County Park & Recreation District programs. The district will offer a variety of cultural enrichment opportunities, including arts, crafts, music and dance classes, in the new space.

Residents will delight in new offerings from The Theatre in the Park, which has historically only offered performances during the summer. The JCAHC will include a 350-seat “black box” theater for use year-round, supplementing The Theatre in the Park’s summer productions at Shawnee Mission Park.

A small portion of the building will be dedicated for use as a public space with a fine arts and cultural arts focus — an amenity that community members and leadership have long desired. Residents will also have an opportunity to rent this space for meetings, receptions and other special events. The county will host a permanent advance voting location within the JCAHC.

While the museum itself will continue operating at its current location in Shawnee for most of 2016, the 1950s All-Electric House will close in January to prepare for the 8.5-mile journey to its new home.

Park & Recreation District projects
Johnson County residents no doubt place a high value on the parks and trails system within their community. According to the 2015 Johnson County Community Survey, residents rank the county’s parks and recreation system tied with ambulance/emergency medical services (MED-ACT) as the most important service the county provides.

For more than 60 years, JCPRD has provided high-quality parks, park services and recreational programs to benefit residents.

Each year, JCPRD records more than 7 million visitors to its more than 4,800 acres of parkland and open green space, as well as nearly 1.5 million recreation participations in over 4,000 programs.

“Thanks to the three quarters of a mill additional funding the Board of County Commissioners approved this past year for the Johnson County Park & Recreation District, 2016 will be a busy year of capital improvements and expansion at JCPRD,” said Jill Geller, the district’s executive director.

“The district, in cooperation with the city of Prairie Village, is currently developing a master plan to convert a portion of the former Meadowbrook Country Club and Golf Course, at 9101 Nall Avenue, to an approximately 80-acre park.

Residents have been highly engaged in both in-person and online opportunities to offer input on this interesting project. The final draft master plan was approved by the district’s board in December 2015.

Big Bull Creek Park Master Plan
JCPRD began purchasing the land for Big Bull Creek Park, located between Edgerton and Gardner in southeast Johnson County, after voters approved acquisition funding through a special referendum in November of 1998.

Upon completion, Big Bull Creek Park will be the district’s largest regional park. The 1,900-plus acre park’s master plan will be completed this spring, and phased development is tentatively scheduled to begin in 2017.

In 2016, additional Legacy Plan implementation projects include development of the Rieke Lake regional park site near De Soto and more than $1.3 million of trail design and development throughout the county.

Longer-term projects include development of 30 miles of new streamway trails and the Cedar Niles property.
**Johnson County Library projects**

According to the 2015 Johnson County Community Survey, nearly 70 percent of county residents report having visited a Johnson County Library branch within the last year.

The Johnson County Library is starting 2016 looking forward to many exciting projects—the most immediate of which is the much-anticipated re-opening of the renovated Central Resource Library on Jan. 22. Averaging more than 1,000 visitors per day, many patrons are anxious for the library to reopen after nine months of being closed for renovation.

This $3.6 million renovation project, launched in March of 2015, includes major facilities improvements to the 20-year-old building, such as new carpeting, improved restrooms, a new air conditioning unit, more electric outlets for patrons who bring their own devices, a 12-station training lab, more study rooms and larger conference rooms.

The library’s popular MakerSpace, which supports science, technology, engineering and math educational initiatives, is increasing to 1,700 square feet—six times its previous size—with generous support from the Kauffman Foundation and Black & Veatch.

In addition, a new Friends of the Library used bookstore will open at the Central Resource Library, generating funds to support early childhood literacy and special collection purchases.

**Comprehensive Library Master Plan implementation**

The library is actively beginning implementation of its ambitious 20-year comprehensive master plan, funded through a .75 mill levy increase approved as part of the fiscal year 2016 budget.

The plan’s first implementation phase will include planning and design of four priority capital projects.

- **Monticello branch:** Additional library services are much needed in the fast-growing area of Western Shawnee. “The Monticello Branch is the unanimous top priority of the Comprehensive Library Master Plan implementation,” explained County Librarian Sean Casserley. “The citizens of this part of Johnson County have long been guaranteed expanded Library services, and we’re positively thrilled to be planning immediately to make that happen.” The new branch is expected to open to the public in 2018.

- **Lenexa branch:** The library is coordinating with Lenexa city government about a site at the new Lenexa Civic Center project, at 87th Street Parkway and Renner Boulevard, as a potential new home for the branch currently located at 87th and Lackman. Anticipated opening for the relocated Lenexa branch is 2020.

- **Blue Valley branch:** The fast-growing population in southeastern Johnson County can expect planning to begin soon for expanded library services. Specifics will be determined in the coming months.

- **Corinth branch:** Planning will begin soon for expanded library services at the aging Corinth branch, possibly on the existing site. No timeline is in place yet, but more details will come soon.

**Transit services expansion**

Transit services are critical to many Johnson County residents, connecting people to jobs and educational institutions and providing critical transportation for disabled residents.

There have been significant changes to transit services in Johnson County over the last year. In an effort to improve services for bus riders within the Kansas City region, previously autonomous transit operators, such as The JO in Johnson County and IndeBus in Independence, Missouri, have joined forces with the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority to become one regional transit system.

Establishing one integrated regional system, branded as “RideKC,” has multiple benefits.
Residents benefit through more efficient use of tax dollars by consolidation of operations; Johnson County Government saved $455,000 through its agreement with KCATA.

Riders benefit from a simplified pass and fare system, and seamless connections when traveling from one part of the metro to another.

Future transit services in our community were given a major boost when the Johnson County Board of County Commissioners approved a .178 mill levy increase for transit improvements—which equates to nearly $1.5 million in new funding.

The funding covers expansion of transit options for disabled and elderly riders and strategic expansion of service in areas that will improve access to jobs for many residents.

Para-transit improvements
The county will better serve seniors and riders with disabilities through greater flexibility of Special Edition, a shared ride program providing affordable curb-to-curb transportation for eligible residents who are 65 or older, disabled or meet income requirements.

Starting in January 2016, Special Edition users are no longer limited to medical appointments if they wish to take the service to parts of Wyandotte or Jackson counties.

Better transportation to work, school and places of commerce
In an effort to create better regional connections between residents, employers, retail outlets and major educational institutions, several positive changes are happening to bus service in Johnson County this year, including:

- Improved service linking the Mission Transit Center and existing routes with the KU Medical Center area.
- Better east-west connections on 95th Street from the state line into Lenexa.
- Improved service in the 75th St./Metcalf Ave. corridors to connect Oak Park Mall, Shawnee Mission Medical Center, Johnson County Community College, KU-Edwards Campus and Prairiefire.

These transit route improvements will be implemented throughout 2016. 🌟

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