

More City Progress

Warrensburg Police and Fire B4

Warrensburg Parks and Rec B9

Warrensburg moves forward: a year of change, growth and citywide projects

By Zach Bott
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The City of Warrensburg has seen plenty of change in its streets, neighborhoods and government personnel in the past year.

Mayor Bruce Uhler is approaching his one-year anniversary in April and is excited about the city's accomplishments and future prospects.

"I'm fortunate to sit with a really good city council with a vision for Warrensburg, how we can get it better and all the good work we've done in the past year and the city staff has been amazing," Uhler said.

Uhler wasn't the only person to step into a new role.

2024 saw the departure of Warrensburg City Manager Danielle Dulin, as she took over the same role in the City of Manhattan, Kansas. Dulin first took over in September 2021 and helped Warrensburg in many fashions.

"She's had a vision to make Warrensburg better than it has ever been," Uhler said at the time. "We have the Rethink Maguire project, the solid waste



While it is under construction for sanitary sewer work, Maguire Street functions as a one-way street for northbound vehicles on Monday, Jan. 20, in Warrensburg. The Rethink Maguire street project received a \$4.5 million grant from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources' (MDNR) Emerging Contaminants Grant for the project's Phase 2 stormwater work.

PHOTOS BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL

program and sewer bond passage for the SBRs."

In Dulin's absence, the city persevered thanks to Assistant City Manager Kristen Dorman filling in during the four-month search process and two months it took for the new city manager to get settled.

The city announced the hir-

ing of new City Manager Mike Schrage on Dec. 24. Schrage served as city manager of the City of Salina, Kansas, for six years and had spent 19 years overall in government. During his time, Schrage oversaw 14 different departments, administered a \$136.7M budget, led citywide strategic planning,

managed large scale infrastructure projects and negotiated numerous economic development grants.

"(We are) very lucky that Kristen Dorman was hired and came in, and she's done a fantastic job," Uhler said. "Mike is the perfect man to come in here."

See **PROJECTS**, Page B10



The City of Warrensburg completed the expansion of Veterans Road in 2024. The road, which previously ended just after the entrance to the Family Dollar/Dollar Tree Distribution Center, now runs through NE 200th RD. The project makes room for future expansion at Brady Commerce Park.

PHOTO BY JOE ANDREWS | STAR-JOURNAL

JCEDC assisting communities with foundation for growth

By Joe Andrews
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For growth and development to take place, there must be an infrastructure foundation.

In 2024, construction took place in a partnership between the Johnson County Economic Development Corporation and the City of Warrensburg to set the foundation for future expansion at Brady

Commerce Park.

The vision for the development first began in 2007. The area is located just to the east of the Missouri Highway 13 bypass and is home to the Dollar Tree/Family Dollar Distribution Center along with a Break Time truck commuting center.

"We've been going through several phases of that over the last 15 plus years, working towards the next goal, the next

goal, the next goal, year over year," Johnson County Economic Development Executive Director Tracy Brantner said. "More recently in 2023 we finished the master plan for phase two, which is more like phase three. In phase two what we did is finish the master planning for the project with an engineering firm. We designed that next phase for Brady Commerce Park."

See **GROWTH**, Page B10

UCM embraces technological advancements in education

By Joe Andrews
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The University of Central Missouri continues to innovate as technology, workforce needs and student needs evolve.

UCM's new Bachelor of Science Degree in Data Science, undergraduate minor in data science and Master

of Science Degree in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence is just a small part of the initiative.

"We've been a little more judicious in terms of adding new academic programs in the last few years," University of Central Missouri President Roger Best said. "That's just recognizing that we have over

100 programs already. We serve a wide range of student interests already through our programs. We want to be careful that when we bring on a new program, that it makes sense from the standpoint of the needs of the state of Missouri, the demand from our students and the demand from the industry."

See **UCM**, Page B10



Gina Eairheart, instructor of Design and Drafting Technology, works with UCM students as they use a virtual reality program during class.

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Progress
2025

Warrensburg Main Street reflects on growth, challenges and plans for 2025

By Zach Bott
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Warrensburg Main Street had plenty to celebrate and look back on fondly in 2024. It also had plenty to improve on and hopes changes in 2025 can help make downtown Warrensburg a better place.

Just ask Main Street Executive Director Jamie DeBacker, who completed her first year in the role.

“You always see the highlight reel of everything happening, but there’s been some challenges,” DeBacker said. “But I think it has made me a better leader (and) it has allowed me to work on my communication and made me branch out.”

2024 was a year of reflection for DeBacker and Main Street.

Change is a norm in downtown areas, as businesses and buildings always seem to have new or no ownership every year. Change can also come in the form of personal preference, or what Main Street is more concerned with, communal preference.

To tend to the needs of its community, Main Street took inventory of its assets.

For its downtown buildings, Main Street used a BOOMS (The Building Opportunities on Main Street) Tracker. The tracker uses geofencing and mapping to help Main Street identify how residential or commercial buildings are being used. It also helped Main Street add a new buying and renting tab to its website and boosted Main Street’s ultimate goal of attracting new businesses and residents.

“It gives us a way to track our inventory of how these historic build-

ings are looking, and then look into opportunities (like) grants and resources that we can pass on to the building owners,” DeBacker said. “We’ve never had anywhere that helps recognize where residential (buildings) are. (We now work) with our building owners and our property owners to (let them) know that this is a hub that we can add to our website.”

For its public events, Main Street looked to the public and businesses in downtown Warrensburg for feedback through surveys and face-to-face conversations. Local businesses know how they perform during Main Street events and how much they can improve. By having conversations, DeBacker and Main Street can proceed with what is best for both parties.

“We have great ideas, but having a different perspective is always the most important thing,” DeBacker said. “That’s why we always invite people to (join) our committees because getting different opinions and different ideas helps us grow as an organization.”

Being a primarily volunteer-based organization, Main Street relies on its relationships with local officials, businesses and the community. They help pick each other up and reassure Main Street of its goal of being a community builder in Warrensburg. DeBacker hopes to see continued investment in Main Street and hopes her organization can reciprocate that.

“We’re trying to make sure that everyone feels comfortable and included,” DeBacker said. “Anyone’s welcome to come and give their opinion. Anyone’s



As seats became more and more a rarity, Burg Fest attendees enjoy the Manda Shea & The Sumpthin Bros. music from the comfort of the Pine Street curb on Saturday, Oct. 12, 2024, in downtown Warrensburg.

FILE PHOTOS BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL

welcome to volunteer and come to our events. Anyone’s welcome just to come and chat about what’s happening downtown. We’re an open office up here. People can walk up, bring their dogs, bring their cats, or bring us cookies.

“What’s special about Warrensburg is that sometimes you go to cities and not everyone gets along, but our community really supports each other.”

Anyone is welcome to join Main Street’s staff as well, as the organization added a new program coordinator in 2024 and is looking to fill a new farmer’s market manager position for 2025. The additions will alleviate some of the duties DeBacker has and allow her to focus on other projects.

DeBacker said a few Main Street projects were stuck in the approval process in 2024. For instance, city art projects like installing a new art mural and the addition of a beaded sun catcher awaited docu-

mentation and city council approval. The same can be said for adding new light pole banners and beautifying the area around the Amtrak station.

The wait hasn’t dissuaded DeBacker.

“My focus as a director is to continue to have people going from Holden Street, from south to north, and then stay on Pine Street,” DeBacker said. “(I want to) extend the viewer’s eyes of our side streets and see what’s an opportunity for them.”

Newly themed art walks and farmer’s markets boosted foot traffic downtown and will look to be incorporated into other events for Memorial Day, Labor Day and the Fourth of July this year. The 2024 Burg Fest was a success as it welcomed the Evans Midland Empire Shows carnival for the second year in a row, along with the many vendors and fun show opportunities at the festival.

Some events fell short of the mark Main Street

was aiming for, but the organization will learn from them.

“Every year is a learning opportunity,” DeBacker said. “We hope that people will give us feedback because we do listen and we do look at them and adjust how we need to make things better

Main Street’s 2025 events calendar has something for everyone, beginning with the organization’s largest fundraising event, Piccadilly, which will be held on March 21 at the Milestones Barn. All proceeds from Piccadilly go directly to Main Street’s efforts to make downtown Warrensburg the best it can be. As of Feb. 21, the event is sold out, but volunteers and donations are encouraged.

From spring into summer, Main Street will host its high school prom parade on April 5, kick off its Moonlight Market on April 26 and farmer’s market on May 3, and continue with its monthly Movie on the Lawn events.

“We’re almost there, which is terrifying, but exciting,” DeBacker said.

Main Street will also entice residents to visit downtown through continued beautification efforts and large community events like its Children’s Patriotic Bike Parade on June 28, fall Burg Fest and December holiday events.

DeBacker also has ideas for a World War II Reader’s Theater in May that will give residents a chance to have their loved ones’ letters read and honored during Historic Preservation Month. She also said Main Street is looking into downtown events for Halloween and will be sure to focus on what is best for the community and Warrensburg.

For more information or to view Main Street’s events list, visit its Facebook page or its website at <https://warrensburg-mainstreet.org/>.

Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Children of all ages pedal their way down Holden Street, kicking off Warrensburg Main Street’s annual Patriotic Children’s Bike Parade on June 30, 2024, at the Johnson County Courthouse.



The 2024 Warrensburg Main Street Volunteer of the Year Award was presented to Heather Harrison (second from right) on Tuesday, Jan. 21, at the MKi Pavilion in Warrensburg. She was one of three nominees for the honor. From left: Warrensburg Main Street Board Vice President Bram Roden, award nominee Jordan Wiegand, award nominee Eddie Chitwood, award winner Heather Harrison and Warrensburg Main Street Executive Director Jamie DeBacker.



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Progress2025

Warrensburg Police Department highlights education and community in 2024

By Zach Bott
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The Warrensburg Police Department used 2024 as a year for education and recognition. Warrensburg Police Chief Andrew Munsterman begins his third year in the role and hopes to continue building on its foundation. “It’s been good. It’s been an exciting new role leading the department into the future,” Munsterman said. We’ve struggled a little bit with staffing, but that’s a struggle in law enforcement country-wide right now.” As of February 2025, the department is allotted 36 officers and is down seven officers.

“We lost a sergeant to the Independence Police Department and we’re interviewing people and trying to hire new officers,” Munsterman said. “We’re running the sergeant process as we speak. When you are short-staffed, it’s hard to keep your staffing levels correct.”

Munsterman said the city of Warrensburg, when taking the University of Central Missouri and Whiteman Air Force Base into account, can fluctuate in population from 30,000 to 35,000 residents at any given time. For a department of Warrensburg’s size, it can be tough to manage at times. But, Munsterman is proud of his staff’s resilience, dedication to its community and ability to respond. Overall, the department responded to 17,626 calls in 2024. The number of responses represented a six percent increase from 2023 and has consistently remained around 17,000 to 19,000 calls since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Focus on Educating

Officer education is first and foremost in Warrensburg. The department wouldn’t be as successful as it is if not for its dedicated officers. They can be found all around Warrensburg, with more on the way soon. Student Resource Officers Corporal Emma Miller and Layne Fischer help man Warrensburg High School and put together a few key learning experiences for students, parents and staff. First, in cooperation with WHS student Emalie Denton, the officers

arranged a mock accident scene at the high school, teaching students the importance of paying attention to the roads. “We always try to make sure the kids know to wear their seat belts and be driving safe,” Munsterman said. “Things can occur beyond their control and just to be as safe as possible when they’re driving.” Munsterman said the officers plan to hold another demonstration ahead of the 2025 high school prom. Secondly, Miller organized one of the department’s newer programs “Hidden in Plain Sight” an August presentation that educated parents and staff on the dangers of teen substance abuse and the lengths they go to hide it inside their homes. “We thoroughly enjoy working in the school district with our SROs. They do a nice job within the school district,” Munsterman said. Educating the Warrensburg youth isn’t all the WPD does. The department is also dedicated to training its very own officers. 2024 saw some department staff earn their FBI Trilogy Award. The award is given to police leaders after completion of three weeklong leadership training classes in supervisor leadership, command leadership and executive leadership. “All command staff went through the FBI LEEDA supervisor training courses,” Munsterman said. “We’re working on supervisors going through that training as well.” Warrensburg PD is focusing on recruiting the next generation of Warrensburg police officers as well. “Our younger generation is our future staff, right? That’s the future of this country,” Munsterman said. “So, we want to be involved with them as much as possible to recruit them, but also educate them on how the police are there to help them, and also make sure that they’re interacting with the police in the appropriate manner to keep them as safe as possible.”

2024 Highlights The last year has also seen the Warrensburg PD continue to foster relationships with other nearby departments and make Warrensburg as safe as it can be. “Our investigative unit has put together a lot of great cases and worked with other agencies, (like) the U.S. Marshals, (Missouri State) Highway Patrol and working on cases to Kansas City, Kansas on homicides, putting together cases, helping them and giving them information regarding some individuals,” Munsterman said. “They’ve done some nice work and don’t get recognized enough for it. They keep coming to work every day and putting in long days and trying to make the city of Warrensburg the best place for the citizens to live in.” Perhaps the most significant 2024 department highlight was the arrests made at Warrensburg Cycle on Nov. 7. Officers from the Warrensburg PD, University of Central Missouri Department of Public Safety and Johnson County Sheriff’s Office responded to an attempted burglary at the business and apprehended five suspects. The efforts saved \$40,000 in stolen ATVs and a stolen U-Haul. “Our investigative unit did a phenomenal job putting things together and running surveillance there,”



Warrensburg Police officers speak with community members after their presentation on Sept. 25, 2024, at Warrensburg High School. Being inside the walls of the district every day, they have seen substance abuse firsthand at the teen level. FILE PHOTO BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL

Munsterman said. “Our patrol officers observed our investigative unit data and were really keen on watching and checking those businesses.” The rarity of catching a person or group of people burglarizing a home or business while it was occurring was not lost on Munsterman. “I cannot thank (and) also applaud those officers that were involved in that enough,” Munsterman said. “Not only did they stop and take multiple people into custody, they put their lives in danger while they did it.” Lastly, the 16th Annual Shop with a Cop event was held on Dec. 9. Seven Johnson County law enforcement agencies gave 47 local kids a holiday shopping spree. The shopping trip was preceded by a police escort from the Warrensburg Community Center to Walmart. “Your emotions are being worn on your sleeve because you really connect with those kids that need that connection,” Munsterman said. “It’s a great program, and it pulls on your heartstrings.” Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.

Warrensburg Fire Department reflects on year of fast responses, new capabilities and initiatives

By Zach Bott
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The Warrensburg Fire Department and Fire Chief Kenneth Jennings had plenty to be proud of in 2024. The department had 1,795 service calls in 2024, resulting in over 11,000 hours of professional development and a 13 percent increase in calls from 2023. Jennings said that number has steadily increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. Of its non-fire incidents, the fire department saw a significant jump in false or malfunctioning alarm systems. Besides a traditional annual inspection, Jennings said the department is looking into partnering with outside services to lessen false alarm incidents because he knows the risks they pose. “If we’re putting fire trucks on the road, at least one of them is normally going to an emergency,” Jennings said. “Even though it’s a (false) alarm, we treat it as if there’s a fire, right? It takes those trucks out of service. If they’re chasing a false alarm and there’s an actual emergency, it puts them out of position.” Of the department’s fire incidents, there was over \$990,000 in estimated fire loss in 2024 and over \$12.1 million in fire loss potential. Warrensburg fires resulted in only one injury and no fatalities.

“It demonstrates to us and the community what the investment (in) the fire department does for the community,” Jennings said. “I look at (those) numbers (and) I’m proud.” The numbers reflect how much emphasis the WFD puts on response time. Operating out of two fire stations, each staffed with a three-person crew 24 hours a day, the WFD saw its response time from station to scene fall to four minutes and 16 seconds. The department’s goal of responding in

less than four minutes and 30 seconds was met 61 percent of the time, a 13 percent increase from 2023. It’s important now more than ever to respond to fires quickly, according to Jennings, because of how fast fires can spread in today’s homes. “We used to see more natural fibers in like our sofas and carpets and it could take anywhere from 15 to 25 minutes for a room to reach flashover, where everything in the room is on fire,” Jennings said. “Now you can see that in as quick as four minutes. That’s the clock we’re up against.” “The quicker we can be there to help control that fire, we increase our survivability for our victims, people living there, reduce the damage and keep our firefighters safer.” The response time decrease comes down to a couple of factors. One, the WFD firefighters are always working to get better at learning the Warrensburg roads and routes. Two, they are using new technology to help get them there quicker. “We get notifications to data terminals (or iPads) in the trucks that have the information on it,” Jennings said. “We have mapping. We can see where our hydrant locations are. Our crews practice regularly on just getting their equipment on and on the truck and out of the door quicker.”

2024 Highlights

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recognized the WFD with a “Gold Helmet Department” designation in October. The designation is given to fire departments that have over 50 percent of their staff enrolled in the National Firefighter Registry for Cancer and help raise awareness for firefighters developing cancer. “It was something as an organization we felt (like) taking the time to register and talk about it and spread

the word,” Jennings said. The WFD was also selected as one of 105 departments in the nation to begin the onboarding process of the new national incident reporting program, NERIS, or National Emergency Response Information System. The current national reporting system, NFIRS (National Fire Incident Reporting System), was first established under The Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act in 1974. It is the world’s largest, national and annual database of fire incident information. However, it lacks a lot of what NERIS can provide. “It expanded a lot of the data points that we’re collecting as we get as many of us (from the fire service) on there as possible. There will be almost instantaneous live dashboards,” Jennings said. “Data has been a contributing factor to decision-making (in) fire service like any other business for a long time. (We can) use that data to put the resources that we’re able to fund where we need them the most. That platform will be able to get us there.” NERIS went online on Jan. 1, 2025, and Jennings hopes to get the system to a fully operational level in Warrensburg by April. The WFD also received two grants for new equipment. A \$96,000 grant award was awarded as part of the Missouri Department of Public Safety ARPA Capital Improvement and Interoperability grant program for the purchase of radio equipment. The grant will provide the WFD with 11 radios and two mobile radios. The radios can be equipped to and assigned to every firefighter and be used to measure accountability in the department. A \$9,589 grant was received from the Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation to purchase two thermal imaging cameras. Jennings said the new cameras are more compact, have better image detail and quality and give the WFD the ability to



The Warrensburg Fire Department received a \$9,589 grant from the Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation, it announced in March 2024. PHOTO COURTESY OF WARRENSBURG FIRE DEPARTMENT

see the outline of a human body. The WFD lost one of its long-time firefighters when Captain Randy Hebensperger retired last March. Hebensperger served the WFD for 32 years. Kylie Frerking was promoted to captain in May after a testing process. “Like all good things, eventually it’s time for the next adventure,” Jennings said. “(Captain Frerking) is doing great. We have six captains in the department and they each do an amazing job every day leading their crews.” The department also added two full-time firefighters in 2024 that will help cover vacancies. “We had a lot of denied PTO and leave requests last year because of our staffing level,” Jennings said. “Adding these people will help with our daily staffing.” Things to Come Jennings hopes to continue with his department’s progress in 2024 and hopes initiatives like better response times continue in 2025. “If we keep landing there, I’m happy,” Jennings said. “If we can improve it, I’m even more happy. We’re just making sure that we’re not adding seconds. A way to make sure response time stays low is adding a third Warrensburg sta-

tion. However, Jennings said those conversations are still ongoing. More recently, the department launched its Community Connect program. Residents can voluntarily share information about their households and alert fire crews to any features of the homes they should be aware of in an emergency situation. Another way to continue improving the WFD is speeding up the time it takes to reach it. To do that, Jennings and his department applied for the FEMA Assistance to Firefighters Grants Program. The grant will allow for the installation of a new interface at the dispatch station and allow for faster transmission from the caller to the department. “It puts a server in dispatch. The dispatcher answers the call. Once (the interface) knows what it is and where it is, that computer grabs (the information) and it dumps it out to our stations,” Jennings said. “A computer voice (comes) over the radio and says, ‘Warrensburg fire respond to this.’ Additionally, Jennings said the department is always trying to put competitive grants together to help grow the WFD and help the city of Warrensburg. Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Warrensburg Mayor Bruce Uhler presents Warrensburg Convention and Visitors Bureau Tourism Director Marcy Barnhart with a proclamation on May 15, 2024, at the Warrensburg Visitors Center. FILE PHOTOS BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL

WCVB reaping benefits of downtown Visitors Center

By Joe Andrews
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There's no place like home, especially when you have a home that is truly yours.

The Warrensburg Convention & Visitors Bureau is now nearly 16 months into occupying a space that was purchased and renovated to fit its needs at 205 N. Holden St.

Tourism Director Marcy Barnhart said the location has created a renewed purpose for the nonprofit organization, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in May 2024.

"In 2024, it was a really exciting year," Barnhart said. "It was our first year in the Visitors Center. We had a home. We were able to see people come in from all different blocks of life and we were able to provide them the service that we have so desperately desired to do now that we have that stability, we have a home."

Conversation for the Visitors Center began with the development of WCVB's master plan in 2014. Saving for the facility began in 2017.

In the meantime, WCVB had a stay at the Warrensburg Municipal Building before moving to a space along East Russell Ave. in 2019.

It was temporarily relocated back to the Municipal Building in mid 2022 while awaiting for the October 2023 completion of its new home.

The purchase and renovation of the space was paid through sources including WCVB's direct fund, a grant from the State of Missouri's Department of Economic Development and ARPA funds from the City of Warrensburg.

"We've never had a home where the WCVB has been able to have staff meetings and board meetings in the locations where we were,"

Barnhart said. "Now we have a location where we can store items. We've been so grateful to the city for supporting us all these years. In 2024, we got to have that home."

With a streetfront home in downtown Warrensburg, WCVB has been able to draw in attention throughout the year by partners such as the Warrensburg Main Street and Warrensburg Chamber of Commerce.

WCVB collaborates with the two entities to form the Love What's Local campaign.

In November, WCVB saw foot traffic mostly through the distribution of a bag created by Love What's Local with Small Business Saturday promotions for businesses around the community.

"It sounds so silly," Barnhart said. "But, we just never had a location that we've been able to do that. We were able to open our doors and say, 'Heck yes, come in.' Individuals coming in to get that bag were like 'Wait, we didn't know we had this, well tell me about the Visitors Center.'"

Its location, essentially right between the Johnson County Courthouse's Old Drum statue and the Warrensburg Municipal Center, has also provided WCVB the ability to host a variety of officials and community organizations.

"We've had different tourism directors from all different communities from around the state of Missouri come in and have meetings with Amtrak officials, Missouri Department of Transportation officials," Barnhart said. "We had Amtrak officials from Jefferson City, from Chicago come in for various meetings. We've had 4-H groups come in, local Rotary groups come in. It has been an incredible opportunity to bring them in, and talk to them about the work of the WCVB and why we are an organization, what we are doing."

Barnhart noted WCVB also has content available for Warrensburg residents looking to plan a trip elsewhere in Missouri.

Spotlighting on the Go Last summer, the WCVB worked with Accelerated Christian Education International to provide attendees with information to accommodate their stay at the University of Central Missouri and Warrensburg.

Similarly, WCVB provided information during Wings Over Whiteman in July. The WCVB also helped sponsor, promote and share information during the Traveling Vietnam Wall's stop in Warrensburg in August.

WCVB also partnered with FOX4 in Kansas City to bring the TV station's ZipTrip broadcast into downtown Warrensburg, highlighting the community and its several local amenities.

"I tell people, I have the best job in the world," Barnhart said. "It's fantastic to talk to individuals, tell them about their community and learn their story as well. That's my favorite part about my job. Getting to talk to those people."

Promoting the Missouri River Runner

The WCVB works closely with all of the communities along the Missouri River Runner, which includes Kansas City, Lee's Summit, Sedalia, Jefferson City, Hermann, Washington, Kirkwood and St. Louis.

"In November, we all got together and went to an outdoor expo that was held at the St. Charles Exhibition Center ... We got to talk to several thousand people those three days about all of

the great opportunities we have in our communities by riding the Missouri River Runner. Hit the trails, check out our great golf courses. It was a great opportunity to talk to several thousand people. We all worked together. It allowed us to keep the costs low. It was minimal resources, but what a great resource."

Marketing Improvements

WCVB will be overhauling its marketing throughout 2025, beginning with the planning of a website redesign.

"We're going to have a more robust, dynamic website," Barnhart said. "We do a lot of digital ads through grants we receive from the Missouri Division of Tourism. Our website is our call to action. We're going to make it so we drive them to our website from those digital ads and we convey our story. It's a dynamic way that it keeps them clicking. We definitely want them to do that. We want them to see the videos, we want them to see the imagery. It's just another way. We're all in this digital world right now. We know that. We're going to step that up."

WCVB will also be redesigning its digital guide to update the community's story.

"In 2023, we redesigned our Visitor Guide to make it more of the story of our people," Barnhart said. "We're a small town with big souls. The soul of our community is our people ... In 2025, we'll be working on a redesign to incorporate more of those stories. More of the imagery that we have. We have incredible events because of the really awesome non-profits in our community that do it, make it happen. We're excited to tell others about our great events."

Both will be published in early 2026.

Digital Profile Study

In March, WCVB will approve a consultant to oversee a year long Digital Profile Study.

It'll look at who's coming into the community, where are they going, how long are they staying, what is the duration of their stay and why are they coming.

The information will allow WCVB to determine if it is meeting the needs of its target audiences. The data will be reapplied to WCVB's marketing plan, and WCVB's budget.

"The why is crucial for us," Barnhart said. "We want to make sure our efforts, our resources are being allocated effectively. We are operated 100% off of the Lodging Tax. Currently, that is the tax that those who stay at our local hotels pay. We do receive some grants from the State of Missouri, but they are reimbursement grants, they're 50/50 reimbursement grants. As grants go, they are marked for certain projects. Allowing us to participate in those grants isn't possible without the lodging tax."

On to 2026

WCVB is beginning to incorporate plans for 2026.

The year will include the potential to target an audience for the 2026 FIFA World Cup in Kansas City.

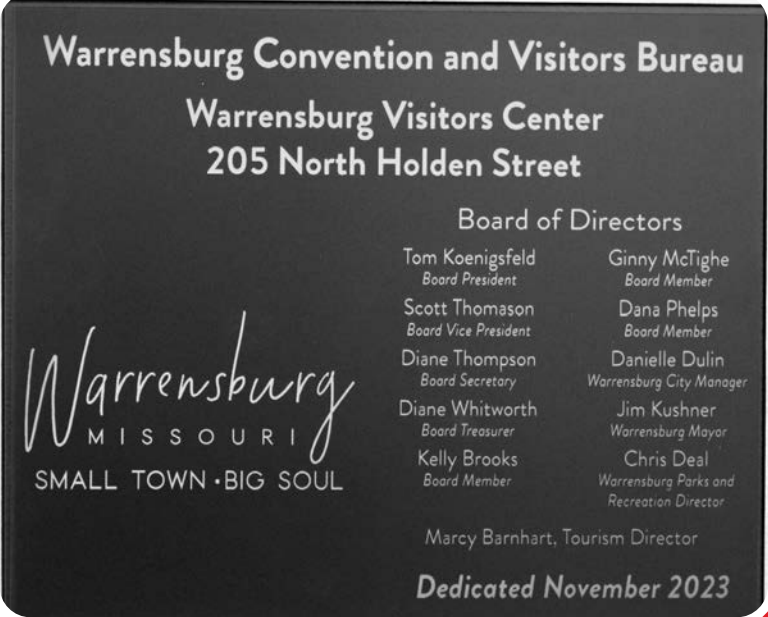
Numerous entities outside of the scope of that impact have also reached out looking for assistance in planning events.

To keep up to date with the WCVB, visit <https://www.warrensburg-mo.com/164/Warrensburg-Convention-Visitors-Bureau> or follow along on Facebook at Visit Warrensburg.

Joe Andrews can be reached at 660-747-8123.



The walls of the Warrensburg Visitors Center are adorned with homages to Warrensburg and the surrounding communities on May 15, 2024



A plaque dedicated to the WCVB Board of Directors rests on the walls of the building on May 15, 2024, at the Warrensburg Visitors Center.

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Warrensburg School District's growth and development highlight 2024



Now-graduates of Warrensburg High School ready themselves to fling their caps to the sky on May 18, 2024, at the Jerry M. Hughes Athletics Center. FILE PHOTO BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL



Natasha Parsons, a sponsor of the Warrensburg Middle School Photography Club, received a Nancy Rutherford Mid-Year Classroom Impact Grant on Wednesday, Jan. 15. The grant was received in partnership with Sheila Moore (not pictured). From left: Back: Superintendent Dr. Steve Ritter, Warrensburg Middle School Principal Holly Jennings and Assistant Superintendent for Student Services Dr. John Finnane. Front: Warrensburg Schools Foundation Executive Director Julie Long, Natasha Parsons and Warrensburg Schools Foundation Chair Bob Lotspeich. FILE PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WARRENSBURG SCHOOLS FOUNDATION



A girl slides on her knees down the hill, hoping to avoid injury or water in her eyes during field day May 20, 2024, at Ridge View Elementary School. FILE PHOTO BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL



Warrensburg R-VI's mascot, Tiger Bob, high fives spectators during the district's homecoming parade Sept. 27, 2024. FILE PHOTO BY JOE ANDREWS | STAR-JOURNAL

By Zach Bott
zachb@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Another year has passed in the Warrensburg R-VI School District, as 2024 marked another year of change at the district filled with growth, development and lessons learned along the way.

Warrensburg Superintendent of Schools Steve Ritter began his second year in the district and hopes to continue improving on the district budget and student test scores.

“One of the challenges in my first year is we had to make some changes to our annual spending,” Ritter said. “We had to add special education teachers and classroom teachers. The ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund) money was going away, so we needed to move away from spending that money and focus on what we were doing with our local money.”

Ritter said the district has a balanced budget. However, there are concerns about funding teacher salaries to a minimum of \$40,000 following the passage of Senate Bill 727 last year. Ritter also is concerned about Missouri Governor Mike Kehoe’s first budget proposal that refused to recommend a \$300 million boost to public school funding.

“Our concern was about whether or not it was going to be funded, and a large portion of that funding has been taken out of the process,” Ritter said. “We need to see how that plays

out. If that money gets put back in, (that’s great). But, we’re in a good spot because of some of the decisions that we made last year. If we hadn’t made those decisions last year, then we would be having to make those decisions this year.”

Ritter faces the challenge of improving district math assessment scores. After focusing on student reading and ELA (English Language Arts) with the help of its LETRS training over the last several years, Ritter said he and Warrensburg Executive Director of Academic Services Susan Crooks are trying to align the district’s math curriculum to help ease the transition between grade levels.

“We’re going to be looking at math focus on trying to get our state assessment scores and our local assessment iReady scores increased in the math area,” Ritter said. “We have students that need to improve on their math skills at all age levels right now.”

District and Curriculum Highlights

The Warrensburg School District is home to many outstanding educators and staff who go above and beyond. 2024 saw the district and its staff earn numerous awards for their efforts.

Ridge View Elementary Assistant Principal Jason Abner won the 2024-25 Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals (MAESP) Outstanding Assistant Principal of the Year award for the Central Region. Sterling Elementary Teacher Dinah Orr won the 2025 Missouri Art Education Association Visual Art Educator of the Year award. Assistant Superintendent for Support Services Dr. Troy Marnholtz was honored as the Assistant Superintendent of the Year for the West Central Region of the Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA).

The past year also saw 70 K-5 teachers complete the Project Lead the Way training opportunity. The STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) program was offered at the elementary level for the first time last summer.

“The more that we can do that for our kids I think is a huge benefit for us,” Ritter said. “We’re looking at what’s the next opportunity that we can provide for our kids.”

The district is also dedicated to honoring its teachers, as it announced it will give out awards to recognize its teachers and staff. Central Bank of Warrensburg is sponsoring the recognition program, which will award a \$1,000 classroom grant for the Teacher of the Year, a \$750 classroom grant for the Support Staff of the Year and a \$500 classroom grant for the Rising Star Teacher of the Year.

“I’ve got one kid here in the district already. I’m gonna have a second one next year, and I’m proud that they’re gonna have a Warrensburg education,” Ritter said.

April Bond Issue

The district’s bond issue on the April 8 General Election ballot is one of the bigger items on the Ritter’s district agenda. The district received approval from its Board of Education to seek a \$16.5 million bond issue that, if approved, will go towards the renovation of a new Early Childhood Center along with district infrastructure improvements.

The issue requires a four-sevenths majority vote from Warrensburg residents. The bond will maintain the current district debt service levy at \$0.82 per \$100 of assessed valuation for 20 years.

At school board meetings on Jan. 16 and Jan. 28, the board approved an agreement to purchase the Woods Supermarket at the end of its sublease with WRS Real Estate LLC on Dec. 1, 2032. The board also signed an addendum along with the sublease agreement to establish the property purchase in 2032 at \$3.5 million through a right of first refusal agreement between the parties.

The grocery store will be renovated into a childhood center and will allow the district to add around up to about 60 more preschoolers into its programs, which equates to around 20 to 25 percent of its graduating classes. The new building will also allow the relocation of preschool programs from Ridge View and Maple Grove Elementary to the Early Childhood Center.

“Other districts have taken older buildings like grocery stores and department stores and, rather than building from scratch, it’s more affordable

to renovate that space and convert that into a space that’s more usable for an educational environment,” Ritter said. “We’re excited about that opportunity.”

Space has become an issue at the district due to increases in Warrensburg housing and will likely continue to grow with the announcement of the B-21 Raider stealth bomber coming to Whiteman Air Force Base.

Just this year, the district has had to add four special education teachers, two fifth-grade teachers and a first-grade teacher to accommodate for incoming students into the district and two school buildings exceeding 100 percent capacity.

“We know we’re slowly but surely gonna be running out of space,” Ritter said. “You don’t want to be trying to figure out what you’re going to do to find space after you’ve already run out. It takes time and coordinated efforts to create more space for student learning.”

Kindergarten readiness is a point of emphasis for the Warrensburg R-VI School District.

“Preschool can really lay a strong foundation for our kids and so we’re excited about the opportunity to be able to expand not only our preschool program, (but) an award-winning preschool program” Ritter said.

Last October, the Warrensburg R-VI School District was awarded the 2024 Early Childhood Education Program of the Year award from FutureBuilders, the educational foundation of the Missouri School Boards Association. The award recognized a mid-sized district with a high-quality preschool program.

If the bond is approved in April, Ritter said the district will immediately begin work to renovate the building and hope to open before the fall of 2026. The district will open the new childhood center operating under its sublease until 2032 when the lease expires and the district can purchase the building.

If the bond does not pass, the district will not be able to expand its preschool program and go back to the drawing board on how it will deal with the increasing number of students and limited space in the district.

Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.

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Shiralee Beck, Warrensburg Area Career Center LPN instructor, adjusts cables under Apollo's left arm on June 6, 2024, at Western Missouri Medical Center. Apollo was moved to WMMC as part of an agreement with the Warrensburg R-VI School District. FILE PHOTO BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL

WMMC expands services, strengthens community ties in 2024

By Zach Bott
zachb@warrensburgstar-journal.com

The Western Missouri Medical Center continued to evolve in 2024, as it remains committed to enhancing patient care, investing in advanced medical technology and supporting the dedicated professionals who make it all possible.

WMMC President and CEO Darinda Dick has now worked at the hospital for 11 years and said the hospital and its community feels like a family.

She's excited to see the continued WMMC growth in the Warrensburg community and is always looking for ways to improve.

Hospital Growth

The hospital expanded its cardiology capabilities when it transitioned its Heart Care of Warrensburg into a fully independent service. The cardiac care service opened in October 2023 and transitioned to an independent service on Dec. 1, 2024. Two board-certified cardiology providers were brought to offer more consistent coverage with full-day clinics, five days a week.

"It gives us more availability to them during the day (and) in the off hours," Dick said. "This is their home base, so they are dedicated to growing the breadth, depth and quality of cardiology services that we offer in this community."

After never employing its own cardiologist, Dick said the hospital has "significantly decreased" the number of transfers for cardiology services needed out of the WMMC's emergency room to hospitals in Kansas City with the new service running at the Heart Care of Warrensburg.

A 2023 partnership with the OB Hospitalist Group has helped the WMMC recruit physician services. The group's Maternal Health Access Solutions (MHAS) Program with the WMMC includes OB/GYN call coverage with clinic

coverage during the week while on call 20 days per month.

"It's a service line that we're really committed to. We deliver about 600 babies a year, but we have been as high as 800 babies per year," Dick said. "We know that it's a service line that is important to this community because of the Air Force Base and our younger population."

The partnership helped pregnancy patients avoid the hassle of waiting for an appointment by adding a centralized call center and texting capability and helped the WMMC add over 250 appointments a month.

"People don't like to wait particularly for their first appointment, whether they're having a problem or they're pregnant," Dick said.

The WMMC Foundation helped raise \$1 million for the WMMC's new CT scanner that has PET scanning abilities. Dick said it's the second CT scanner at the hospital and will be fully up and running by August.

"Having two CTs is significant because we'll never be down for a CT problem," Dick said. "It has PET scanner abilities, which is what helps stage cancers. That will support our cancer program."

The hospital is welcoming a new orthopedic surgeon by the end of the summer. It will also welcome new doctors in OB and sports medicine in the future.

Community Benefit

Educating the Warrensburg public is always a treat for the WMMC and Dick.

The hospital's 12th Annual Ladies' Night Out event raised awareness for breast cancer and mammograms. Over 750 women attended the event held in October and the WMMC Foundation announced its plans to purchase a second mammogram machine for the hospital.

Last March's Blue Ribbon Bash helped raise awareness for colorectal cancer and the



Heart Care of Warrensburg will become a fully independent service of Western Missouri Medical Center (WMMC) effective Dec. 1, 2024. FILE PHOTOS COURTESY OF WESTERN MISSOURI MEDICAL CENTER

importance of screening for those over 40.

Dick said the biggest way the hospital helps the community is through its \$58 million in salaries and \$13 million in benefits. It equates to over \$70 million invested in the livelihoods of the people in Warrensburg.

"We do employ 750 people and we spend a lot of money to make sure that everybody's continuing to have good lives," Dick said.

From recruiting high school students in its hands-on ECHO Camp to PCT (patient care technician) training, the WMMC is also committed to developing the next wave of healthcare professionals.

Last summer also saw the hospital's partnership with the Warrensburg Area Career Center's Licensed Practical Nursing Program. The program wasn't receiving enough enrollment, so the WMMC agreed to subsidize it and hope to replenish it with students.

"That's the only nursing school in our community because UCM's bachelor's degree is in Lee's Summit. It was really important to me to keep that LPN program local," Dick said.

Quality of Care

Being a nurse by background, Dick understands how critical the relationship between caregiver and

patient is to get right.

At the WMMC, quality care comes first for all patients.

To achieve this, the WMMC has made efforts to improve efficiency and overall safety. For instance, it remodeled its ER and met its goal of being under three hours on average for patient arrival time to patient discharge.

"(We now have) more space for triage, more space to do pre-testing like labs and EKG, more constant observation type rooms," Dick said of the remodeling that took six months. "We also made the med stations more secure. It has better workflow space for the nurses. We're always improving those things to try and make it better."

The WMMC received a five-star CMS rating in 2024 for its quality care. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services awarded WMMC the rating last summer, making it one of 10 Missouri hospitals to receive the honor. The hospital previously received a five-star rating in 2022.

"I'm pretty proud of that. That's a pretty big deal," Dick said. "What (a) five-star (rating) means is we have consistent processes."

Helping its Own

The hospital cares deeply about its employees, auxiliary and volunteer staff. It sits at a 24% employee turn-



WMMC President and CEO Darinda Dick (left) receives a demonstration on the Fujifilm ASPIRE Cristalle digital mammography system at Ladies Night Out 2024.

over rate but is making efforts to compete with other, more-fluid competitors in the area. In addition to a two percent raise each year of employment, the WMMC offers tuition reimbursement and other workforce development programs.

The WMMC is also dedicated to honoring its employees.

In 2024, it added a new recognition, the Champion Award. Employees are nominated by their peers and receive a champion belt and jacket if they win.

"We do feel like a family here because we take care of our family members and our friends' family members every single day,"

Dick said.

Dick said the hospital is one of the most friendly places you can visit and makes sure to tell every new employee to smile and greet everyone they can.

"We want it to feel like a home or a friendly place to people when they come here," Dick said. "Hard things happen in any kind of work environment. Morale needs constant work, and you're never going to be perfect at it. I think it's important for patient outcomes because if you don't have good morale, you're not going to translate it to the patients."

Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Josh Link and Kelsey Glassmaker play against Cameron Lacen and Wayne Stoll during the Go Big or Go Home Pickleball Tournament on Aug. 3, 024, at Grover Park. FILE PHOTO BY JOE ANDREWS | STAR-JOURNAL

More pickleball on Parks and Recreation’s agenda for 2025

By Joe Andrews
joea@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Pickleball, taglined as the fastest-growing sport in the United States, took Warrensburg by storm in 2024.

Warrensburg Parks and Recreation partnered with the Blane Whitworth Go Big or Home Foundation to bring six new pickleball courts to West Parks in the spring.

The area, which previously housed two tennis courts, became one of the prominent places to be in terms of outdoor recreation opportunities provided by Parks and Rec. “That was around \$10,000,” Warrensburg Parks and Recreation director Chris Deal said. “Our maintenance and public works assisted in that project. We had a tournament, and people are really enjoying the new pickleball courts.”

Along with individual leisure, several events were held at the courts, including the Go Big or Go Home Pickleball Tournament that was organized to give back to the Blaine Whitworth Foundation.

The demand for the courts, along with the popularity of indoor leagues at the Warrensburg Community Center, is why Parks and Rec had opted to renovate two more tennis courts at West Park to increase the outdoor pickleball court total to 12.

“Tennis has really dropped off, and pickleball has really jumped up,” Deal said. “It’s one of the hottest things in America right now, actually, in terms of amenities being added in parks. For us to pick up six more courts, it is going to be real nice as far as meeting those needs.” In addition, Parks and Recreation will repaint the remaining four tennis courts at West Park.

“We’re going to end up with 12 pickleball courts and four tennis courts that will be renovated at GroverPark,” Deal said. “That is going to be a nice project.”

Parks and Recreation is also looking at adding outdoor basketball to the options at Grover Park.

It will add to amenities that al-

ready include the Nassif Aquatic Center, a skate park, pickleball and tennis.

Parks and Recreation is still weighing its options on location within the park.

“A lot of times the kids come up here, and sometimes they’re dropped off here all day long at Nassif swim,” Deal said. “They have to have some extra things to do outside. That’ll be a nice extra. Basketball will be one more thing. It’s been a request too. It’ll be nice to have that.”

Creating Inclusivity at Hawthorne Park

Through a grant of approximately \$25,000 from the Johnson County Board of Services, Parks and Rec paved the parking lot at Hawthorne Park.

“This was a gravel parking lot,” Deal said. “It’s wasn’t completely ADA compatible, but it is now. That’s kind of phase one of what we are doing out there at Hawthorne Park.”

Parks and Recreation has also placed fencing around the playground at Hawthorne Park, a safety improvement due to its proximity to Hawthorne Blvd.

The fence was made possible through a grant from Johnson County Christmas Cheer and Lowe’s.

“It’s nice to have that fence up there,” Deal said. “Eventually there is going to be other work done out there at Hawthorne Park.”

The new parking lot is a part of the plan to build a sensory garden trail at the park.

The project is now moving into Phase 2 through the grant from JCBS.

The trail will run behind the playground and will be ADA-accessible. Design for the project will take place in 2025. Phase 3, which will be construction, will take place in 2026.

“It’s a sensory garden because of the types of things kids can do from a wheelchair, or other people who are differently abled are able to do, whether it is sound, feeling or things

like that,” Deal said.

Bettering the Community Center

The Warrensburg Community Center has seen several upgrades over the course of the last year, including the addition of new equipment to the fitness center.

The indoor pool was resurfaced and retiled. New equipment, including backup equipment, was also purchased.

“If the pool ever breaks or goes down, we have that equipment available and we won’t have a long duration of time because of necessary repairs. I’m very pleased with the way that the project turned out. We’re up and running.”

In 2025, the Community Center’s entryway will be remodeled, providing a more modern feel.

“The reason for this is the building is 27 years old,” Deal said. “This is something that is going to be more welcoming and provide a better functional entrance to the community center. You’ll be greeted as soon as you go in. We’re looking for some programming things as well. We’re excited about that. We’re just getting started on that. We have to go through the selection process on design and all that, but that is scheduled for this year.”

Aquatics Operations Now Under Parks and Rec’s Control

Warrensburg began operations of its indoor pool and the community center and the outdoor Nassif Aquatics Center in 2024.

The facilities had previously been under contractual operation for seven or eight years.

Deal said he targeted moving to the local operations when he first joined the city as Interim Director in November 2022. He was appointed to the full position in May 2023.

“First we needed to deal with the pool that was down,” Deal said. “We’ve added new entrance signs to our parks. We’ve done a lot of different things that I wanted to get completed and built up. We expanded our fitness center as well. We got some new equipment, new paint. Once we got that completed,

we moved on this last year with the aquatics. .”

Deal said the transition to in-house operations for the pool was almost seamless.

“It was just the timing of hiring the new staff,” Deal said. “For the most part, the consulting company did a good job, I’m just used to running it in-house which also saves us money. The transition from that, they used a lot of the people that were in town anyway. We had lifeguards, people from the college and high school. We just had to get our aquatics manager in place, which we did ... That worked out really well. I would say it was almost seamless because we have staff that knows what they are doing. This is the fifth facility I have operated pools in. It has gone really well.”

Program Updates

Deal said Warrensburg had thousands of children and adults participate in its sports programs, fitness and special events.

“We had a Haunted Trail, as well as hayrides out there at Cave Hollow for Halloween,” Deal said. “We’ve had several 5K runs. One of the biggest impacts I feel in the community is the Christmas decorations at Lion’s Lake. We had a lot of compliments on that. This was our second year with it. It’s been a very successful year.”

A calendar of Parks and Recreation events for 2025 can be found at www.warrensburg-mo.com/160/Parks-Recreation.

Other Upgrades

Parks and Recreation will be adding ag lines to its ball field to ensure they are more playable.

Trail, parking lot and other maintenance is also on the docket for the year.

“The bottom line is, as the park board expects us to do, we are taking care of what we have and adding new things to our park system as funding allows,” Deal said. “I think we have a pretty exciting year.”

Joe Andrews can be reached at 660-747-8123.



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PROJECTS

From Page B1

He's calm, cool, collected, (has) so much experience and he's really big into public and private partnerships."

The year also saw Warrensburg lose Assistant City Manager and Director of Public Works Enrico Villegas and former city council member Tarl Bentley. Villegas was replaced by Interim Public Works Director Phil Adlich, while Bentley's vacant council seat was filled by Suzy Latare.

Rethink Maguire Project

The city of Warrensburg's desire to improve its main corridor, Maguire Street, has been in the works for some time.

Warrensburg's gateway street was in dire need for refining of its infrastructure, public safety and overall appeal. In some areas, for instance, sewer lines were found to be not up to city code and were at times collapsed.

Phase 1 of the project, which includes sanitary sewer, gas and water upgrades, began last summer and continued into 2025.

In January, the city was approved to receive \$4.5 million from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources' (MDNR) Emerging Contaminants Grant. Through the state's Clean Water State Revolving Fund program (CWSRF), the funds will be used for stormwater work as part of Phase 2 of the Rethink Maguire project.

Phases 1 and 3 of the project are being funded through voter-authorized general obligation bonds that were approved by the Warrensburg voters.

Phase 2, meanwhile, needed funding to help pay for the city's planned construction of two underground stormwater detention basins with equipment for the treatment of microplastics.

"I have to say that I'm so proud of the residents of Warrensburg," Uhler said. "They're anticipating what's finally going to make (Maguire) faster, safer, better, look nicer, have new sidewalks, grass strips, move the power poles, etc."

Solid Waste

Last September, the city of Warrensburg agreed to a contract with Constable Sanitation, Inc. for the its citywide solid waste and recycling service.

The move to Constable comes years after the city was left without a trash and recycling provider following issues with a previous provider. The city held an extensive search, which ended with it agreeing on a contract with Constable for services to 6,000 Warrensburg residential service addresses at a cost of \$31 per month to residents' monthly sewer bill.

"We've had great meetings with (Constable)," Uhler said. "They have spent a couple of months here in town since they were awarded the contract planning their routes and driving around town."

Constable began delivery of its 96-gallon trash and recycling carts on Tuesday, Feb. 18, as it begins ramping up for the commencement date on March 1, with trucks rolling out on March 3. Constable's services will

also include weekly curbside yard waste service of 10 bags or bundles per week and monthly curbside bulky waste service of one item per month.

"It's a progress project to move forward, be a bigger city, have recycling, have a cleaner city, and it was a necessary thing at the time to do this," Uhler said. "We're a city of 20,000, really 30,000 (people in the) daytime, and we needed a company to provide recycling, bulky items and yard waste."

Other city projects and highlights

Another large city project is the upgrading of the existing facilities at the West and East Wastewater Treatment Plants to enhance their capacity and efficiency.

Warrensburg residents voted to approve the issuance of up to \$22 million in sewer revenue bonds through the state revolving fund in 2023. With approval, the bonds were to be used for to expand treatment capacity of the plants and improve the quality of the water being discharged into the U.S. waterways.

"They needed the upgrades at both plants, and then that allows for progress for the city to be able to grow in the future, with new housing additions," Uhler said.

The city is currently taking bids for the project with a deadline of March 10.

Elsewhere, Uhler was proud of city departments like Parks and Recreation and Tourism for work done in 2024 to improve the city and attract new people and business.

He was also proud of Warrensburg and Johnson County's designation as an American World War II Heritage City back in May 2024.

"We want to honor the veterans, and also the role that the city played in World War II with not just the veterans, but also Whiteman Air Force Base," Uhler said.

City Future

Uhler said the city's budget and finances are in good shape largely because of the financial team in Warrensburg. They have planned and prepared diligently for any and every expenditure, and projection and are prepared to competitively analyze the wages of employees across Warrensburg.

"You have to plan for what increases are coming up, what payments you have to make on different bond issues, what bond may be closing in the future," Uhler said. "We lose good policemen, firemen and staff to a different metro area sometimes after they go through training. It was a way to say, 'Here's where we need to be competitive,' and because we have a great police and fire department and first responders here."

Looking ahead, Uhler hopes for continued success for the city and its residents. He also hopes that any challenges can be addressed collaboratively.

"We want residents, visitors or whoever to come in, participate and say, what do you want to see in the city of Warrensburg in the future? What makes a thriving small community?" Uhler said.

Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.

GROWTH

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To begin the physical path to completing that next phase, Veterans Road was expanded to NE 200th RD.

Additional infrastructure, including utilities, was installed along the route to make way for future development across 165 acres of land.

Brantner said former State Senator Denny Hoskins, now Missouri's Secretary of State, was a key part in helping planners secure state funding for the infrastructure.

The many partners in the project included the City of Warrensburg, Superior Bowen and McClure Engineering.

"[It creates] the opportunity for any new businesses and expansion options for local companies that may need space for it," Brantner said. "It has a very tight timeline. We started working, many team members ... We started working in October 2023 to build this road out. We had to have it done by June 2024. We put our foot on the gas, moved forward as the team that we had. We had great team members. We were able to get that done in June 2024 as required."

In terms of what the road expansion does for

Warrensburg and Johnson County, the answer is quite simple.

"What that does is it opens up so many additional opportunities for not only our local businesses to have a location to expand to, but also if we wanted to recruit additional businesses and employers to the area," Brantner said. "That provides an opportunity that we didn't have previously for Warrensburg."

Assisting in ARPA funds

Johnson County Economic Development partnered with the Johnson County Commission to provide funding to local communities, including the City of Chilhowee, the City of Centerview, the City of Leeton, the City of Knob Noster, the City of Holden and Public Water Supply District No. 3 for wastewater and stormwater improvements.

A total of \$1.1 million of funding was distributed between those communities.

"We also helped those communities manage local wastewater projects wherever needed," Brantner said. "There are a lot of rules with deploying ARPA funds. Some of them were also using their ARPA funds as well to do these sustainable wastewater projects to truly make a long-term investment in their communities,

which is what we wanted to incentivize or motivate. Infrastructure is important to economic development. If you don't have basic infrastructure, you don't have basic economic growth ... We're trying to motivate that reinvest in those systems for the long-term health of the community."

Brantner noted the projects were mostly the initiatives of the individual communities, with JCEDC and Johnson County providing any assistance needed.

Helping Local Businesses

JCEDC provides Small Business Development services for Johnson County in connection with the Small Business Development Center at State Fair Community, the University of Missouri Extension.

"We're a part of a team of SBDC councilors across the state with a wide variety of expertise, Brantner said. "That gets our local small businesses plugged in to those resources they wouldn't have otherwise. All of our services are no cost and confidential. Any small business person either in business or looking to be in business that is an entrepreneur or do a startup, we provide those services at no cost to them and it's always confidential."

JCEDC had roughly 170 counseling hours in 2024 with businesses in Johnson

County.

It averages 35 to 40 active clients at a time.

"We're getting them to a place to take advantage of some opportunities that they would not have been aware of otherwise," Brantner said. "Helping them through anything that's a barrier or challenge to them. Through this network, we're providing business training workshop opportunities. We had roughly 20 last year. We had about 180 regional participants in those 20 workshops or training sessions. Many of those are no cost. We do have a few that we have to charge for because we have to pay for an instructor. They're also virtual. We're trying to deliver those small business resources and those training opportunities when and where people need to observe them."

Other Projects

In 2024, JCEDC worked with the City of Holden to finish its comprehensive plan, a project that began in 2021.

"We're making sure communities are viable and growing across Johnson County in whatever way that we can."

To learn more about Johnson County Economic Development, visit growjocomo.org.

Joe Andrews can be reached at 660-747-8123.

UCM

From Page B1

The program combines aspects of artificial intelligence, machine learning and data science.

According to Lightcast, a labor market analysis company, data science jobs in Missouri have grown 3.9% in the last two years, and are on track to increase by 10.2% before 2032.

Lightcast indicates there are 97,045 people employed in the data science field in Missouri.

"One thing I want to highlight that I think is going to become very critical for not only the university, but also the state of Missouri is our data science program," Best said. "If you think about data science, data science is a fairly generic term. If you start looking at the context of the curriculum, anymore everybody has heard of artificial intelligence, everybody knows what the term means to some extent, but not the technicalities behind it."

UCM's data science program provides students with the resources to design AI systems, as well as the usage standpoint.

Understanding the usage of AI also translates to several of UCM's academic programs across the board.

"For us, it's two folds," Best said. "How can we use artificial intelligence tools in our classrooms, in our classrooms, in our courses, to affect learning? The flip is, how do we educate students on how to use artificial tools in their own professions? Our faculty are working very diligently on implementing those into our curriculum as well."

AI is not the only technological tool UCM is innovating with.

"If you look at the progress we're making there, the how we educate students is changing dramatically," Best said. "Students learn differently and that's not just what we normally call modality. Modality is are you in person, are you online, are you in some mix of that? We have these nice terms that we capture the modality. But in reality, how you really learn, we know so much about that. We know that what we call immersive experiences, are those types of learning environments where you learn better?"

Otherwise known as virtual reality, immersive experiences use multi-media components to bring users into a physical environment.

"We started down this path with virtual reality and augmented reality several years ago now, bringing on a new lab over in Lee's Summit [at the Missouri Innovation Campus]," Best said. "We have a lab here on campus, which a lot of people think of it in terms of the game goggles, right? You put on the goggles and you're inside this virtual road. But, It's unbelievable the scope of the learning environment you can create within a virtual world. You're in an augmented world."

The technology has long been used within UCM's Aviation program at Skyhaven Airport. Before students even get into a real cockpit, they use simulators to get comfortable with their environment.

Similar augmented reality tech is also being used in many other programs at UCM, including fashion merchandising.

"A lot of the hands-on touch learning that individuals do today is starting to happen in virtual worlds," Best said. "Instead of having to buy highly expensive equipment to have you touch, feel and play with, and move things around and practice on, you can now do that virtually to get started."

Best said the new tools are all about continuing to innovate as education keeps up with technological advances.

"If you think about the onboarding of the internet, how that transformed, how we educate students versus the pre 2000, how did we educated students versus now? The internet had a lot to do with that and the computer technology behind that. With AI tools, with virtual reality tools and the speed that they're being developed, it's not going to take 20 to 30 years to move as far as the internet moved us in that length of time and rate. In 10 years, we're going to move very far, very fast. That's all of Higher Education. But, we're trying to be leaders in that spectrum and make sure we are staying on top of that."

Highlighting Facility Upgrades

The Humphreys Building, located in the center of campus, continues to have an overhaul.

The structure was initially two separate standalone buildings in the 1900s. In the 1960s, a connected section was added to make the two buildings into one.

Scheduled for completion in February 2026, the renovated space will fea-

ture offices, classrooms, labs, e-sports and collaboration spaces.

The project cost \$39.9 million,

"It's a very substantial renovation," Best said. "The renovation will look somewhat the same on the outside, but the inside will be completely different ... We're right in the middle of that and making good progress on that."

2024 saw the completion of renovation of the former Lovinger Gymnasium, which now houses the Hough Counseling Center.

Space next to the counseling center was also renovated into conference rooms.

"It's education counseling and involved in the education of our students who want to become counselors," Best said. "That's a better than a million dollar project that was donor funded. It really transformed the gym that was Lovinger into education space. We have new counseling rooms that meet the requirements for two way observation. They're used in educational purposes, for educational purposes, but also are actual counseling sessions that happen behind certified counselors, student trainees and clients."

In the athletics spectrum, UCM opened the Harbert Collegiate Golf Center in May 2024. The space, located at Mules National Golf Club, provides offices for coaches, as well as lounge space for student athletes.

UCM also renovated the Terry Noland Football Office Complex.

Outside of physical upgrades in the public eye, several HVAC updates have also taken place across campus within the last year.

"It's always challenging to make those kind of investment in the behind the walls stuff," Best said. "If it doesn't work right, suddenly people wonder what's going on. We have an older physical plant, and our HVAC systems are older as well. We've been trying to modernize those and put them in place. Those are things that people won't necessarily see, but they'll eventually feel and appreciate because they work appropriately."

Planning Ahead

On the main campus front, UCM's top priority is creating a welcome center to campus. The project is pending funding.

UCM also has long-term plans to renovate Yeater Hall. That item is in the planning process as the University analyzes its

options for what will be a complete overhaul of the current structure.

"Yeater's been closed for quite a number of years now, and the biggest challenge for Yeateris that when it was designed, it was not designed with central heat and air in mind. There's no way to retrofit it appropriately with central heating and air. We would do a major reconstruction on the Yeater Residence Hall in order to create a more modern facility that accommodates modern living for our students."

Upcoming projects on the athletic front include a new locker room for Mules wrestling and Jennies volleyball.

UCM's not-so-distant plans also include the TR Gaines Building, which will see upgrades to classrooms, lab space, offices and bathrooms.

That project will make way for the cohabitation of the Construction Management and Safety Science programs.

"We received a gift from the Sunderland Foundation about a year ago, and also funding from the State of Missouri through the Mo Excels Program ... We're going to bring on modern safety science and construction management lab spaces in addition to redoing some classrooms, offices and bathrooms there. What the board approved in the fall was not the full scope. We still have a little more to do in terms of scope, but they approved almost \$3 million worth of reconstruction in those spaces in order to modernize the facilities."

Enrollment Update

According to the University's Spring 2025 census, 12,871 students are enrolled this spring.

The number includes 8,152 undergraduate students and 4,629 graduate students.

In Fall 2024, UCM saw a 73.8% retention rate for first year full-time students.

64% of the student body is from the state of Missouri. Since 2020, UCM has seen a 29% increase in its enrollment.

UCM currently has direct connect partnership switch students from State Fair Community College in Sedalia, North Central Missouri College in Trenton and Jefferson College in Hillsboro.

UCM saw a 15.4% increase in new student transfers in Fall 2024.

94% of the school's graduates are employed or continuing their education after six months.

Joe Andrews can be reached at 660-747-8123.





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WHITEMAN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



BEST PLACE TO
WORK - 25 OR MORE
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TRANSFORMING CAMPUS, EMPOWERING STUDENTS

UCM's Commitment to Progress & Innovation



Humphreys Building



Hough Education and Counseling Center



Harbert Collegiate Golf Center



Noland Football Office Complex



Skyhaven Airport



The University of Central Missouri, proudly located in Warrensburg, is transforming its campus, advancing academics and expanding opportunities for students. UCM is creating modern learning spaces and enhancing student experiences to meet the needs of today's workforce. In 2024, nearly \$40 million was invested in major renovations, including the Humphreys Building, Hough Education and Counseling Center, and Harbert Collegiate Golf Center, to name but a few. These improvements are made possible through a combination of state funding and generous donor contributions.

Looking ahead, UCM plans to renovate residence halls, develop new athletic and academic facilities and add enhancements to Skyhaven Airport and the Aviation program. The university is strategically launching new programs that align with industry needs and student demand, expanding offerings in Artificial Intelligence and data science, integrating immersive virtual reality learning and reinforcing its commitment to accessible, high-quality education. As a dedicated partner of the Warrensburg community, UCM continues to collaborate with local businesses, organizations and leaders to create meaningful opportunities for students and strengthen regional growth.

Through progress and innovation, UCM remains dedicated to redefining what's possible for the next generation of leaders in Missouri and beyond.