

PHELPS COUNTY
2021 BUDGET MESSAGE

Now on this 28th day of January, 2021, comes Pamela K. Grow, Clerk of the County Commission, as budget officer, and presents for the records of the County Commission information and estimates for the year 2021 as required by the County Budget Law (Sections 50.525 to 50.745, RSMo.)

The year 2020 could be considered by many to be extraordinarily tumultuous. The main factor to be considered would, of course, be the outbreak of a novel (or new) strain of a coronavirus upper respiratory infection at the close of the 2019. Believed to originate in China, the virus named Covid-19 caused enormous degrees of upheaval. From the way individuals were allowed by the public health apparatus to live their day-to-day lives, all the way to international travel and trade when then-president Trump and other nations' leaders invoked travel bans, nothing was unaffected. While the spectrum of disease severity was broad and ranged from minimal or no symptoms to death from respiratory failure, measures were undertaken in our country, as well as worldwide, to mitigate the most extreme outcomes. These included mask mandates, shuttered schools with the institution of virtual learning, lockdowns of long-term care facilities and hospitals even to the point of prohibitions on visiting the deathbed or holding funerals, and what were often draconian restrictions on businesses: how many customers could be inside and in what proximity, whether buffets could operate as normal (usually not), what sanitizing measures were needed, could barstool seating be used (often not). Local governments often invoked restrictions beyond their state mandates. Words came into common use: "lockdown" and "doomscrolling" (looking at one's smart phone incessantly for mortality statistics), "vaccine passport" (proof of immunization, permitting more options for travel), and "PPE" (personal protective equipment.)

Unemployment soared and the national GDP plummeted. All this, during a fractious presidential election year when larger cities were experiencing extreme civil unrest with riots and arson of both public and private businesses, even assaults and some homicides, often said to be fomented by outrage over the death or injury of people in police custody. The scale of the discord was similar to that of the Vietnam War protests.

Phelps County took such measures as locking the doors of the courthouse, for six weeks during the spring, and admitting the public on a case-by-case basis—this often after they were questioned about travel to China, exposure to (or symptoms of) illness. In Phelps County this was done after a unanimous Commission vote, in an open meeting. I do not believe that the courthouse was ever before locked to the public. The 25th Judicial Circuit Courts, bound by the Missouri Supreme Court's advisories, underwent a fluctuating and stressful series of alterations of reduced court activity and/or virtual court appearances. Extensive and permanent modifications were made to the equipment within

the courtrooms to permit this. The Circuit Clerk's office and other offices in the courthouse had reduced numbers of staff working behind newly-installed barriers in some cases, and other employees worked from home. "Teleworking" thus entered the lexicon.

In spite of all this, the county was financially preserved. One reason for this was the provision, through the creation of more monetized debt by the U.S. Treasury, of over \$5.2 million dollars to the county in "CARES ACT" Covid-19 Relief funds, roughly mid-year. The county was to be responsible for distributing these funds to local governments and eventually to businesses, after the legalities of the distribution were worked out. This required the county to create a new fund, with CARES Act funds (and any accrued interest) as the only revenue source. The expenditures were distributions, limited to expenses of the recipient which were related to Covid-19 and which had not been previously budgeted for 2020, and a small amount to Meramec Regional Planning Commission which undertook the administrative responsibilities. Phelps Health (formerly Phelps County Regional Medical Center) received over \$2 million and hundreds of thousands of dollars went to the schools in the county, first responder agencies, the city governments, and the S&T campus. Small businesses were awarded sums of \$5,000 or less, with adequate supporting documentation of expenses paid. The county, itself, for PPE, installation of shielding, overtime and the purchase of hardware and software needed for remote working, received approximately \$455,000.

Another reason the county remained solvent was preservation of other major revenues: property tax was stable, and sales tax actually increased by 5.35% when compared to 2019. County employees were all paid, on time and in full.

Because FEMA and CDBG (Community Development Block Grants) bore the entire fiscal burden, the buy-out of flooded properties in Jerome and Sporthaven proceeded. The Phelps County Sheriff's Department was able to purchase two residential properties to the south, with more parking space in mind, and another property for a new shooting range. Federal prisoner payments have to a large degree made this possible.

I extend my thanks to the elected officials and department heads, who always respond quickly when budget time nears; they take it seriously.

2020 was by far the busiest year in my 7 years as clerk. I am indebted to my office staff who energetically and cheerfully helped so many members of the public as we kept our office open the entire year (though we had to temporarily suspend passport application acceptances when told to do so by the Department of State) and proceeded with *30 weeks of absentee voting through four elections*—much of this as "walk-in" absentees within the office.

Respectfully submitted,

Pamela K. Grow, Phelps County Clerk