



## *Joe Hefe, City Manager*

JOE HEFELE RETURNED TO THE NAUTICAL CITY TO RESTORE THE COMMUNITY HE GREW UP IN AND START THE CITY'S NEXT CHAPTER

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

We moved here when I was 10 years old. I'm originally from Cincinnati and then spent most of my childhood in Kalamazoo. I was used to the city, so it was obviously a culture shock, but I grew to love it. I honestly really enjoyed my youth experience and my high school experience. I graduated from college and didn't move far away, but I was watching from afar and saw some deterioration of the community I loved. Storefronts that were open began to close. In terms of neighborhoods, I think Rogers City is one of the better-kept communities in the entire state and it's something that we've always taken our pride in, but I was seeing slippage there, too.

To turn that back around, I felt that Rogers City needed someone who grew up here,

had a love for the community, and had a passion to put everything they could into trying to make it better. That was my mindset. At the time Rogers City was hiring for a City Manager, my wife and I were actually driving all around the state and looking at multiple jobs in other places.

But when I found out the City Manager position was open, we talked about it and said, 'We're going home.'

Making things better was twofold. First, you try to take your assets and strengthen them, making them all that they can be.

For most communities on the Great Lakes, their most valuable real estate is along the lake. That's where a big chunk of your tax base comes from,

whether it's from businesses or beautiful homes and condos. Here, almost all of the lakefront are parks: there's one park, after another park, after another. Because we're missing the tax base that would have come from properties, we need to make every improvement possible to those parks. We need to make them the best they can be and take advantage of the fact that we are different from everybody else by having all of that public space near the water, so we've been working very hard on that.

We have a park called Seagull Point that is absolutely beautiful. It's a nice beautiful walk through wooded trails and then you circle around and can walk the beach forever. But there were two drives to it, not enough parking or seating, and no way for people who have physical handicaps to get down towards the water. Now, on one of the two drives we're putting a nice deck in there and permanent benches. We're enlarging one of the parking lots. We have one large park that has woods around it and folks use it for things like family reunions,

class reunions and more.

So, while our most valuable real estate isn't filled with expensive real estate, it is truly an asset anyone can use. If it helps bring people in, that is only going to help our downtown; what we find is that when people come here, some fall in love with it, and then buy a place here to live. Building on our strengths is absolutely vital.

Then you try to take weaknesses and turn them around. For example, when I got here, Rogers City had no blight-related ordinances. We implemented all kinds of ordinances, like a rental inspection program. We wanted to use every tool in our tool belt to make sure that slippage didn't occur. In the former community I was in, they didn't do that and it did slip, little by little; the homes lost value and it became less of a place people wanted to live, so they moved away. Then it just snowballed.

Decisions like that are not always easy and you can get pushback from the community, but you have to make them because of what will happen to the entire community down the road.

When you first come into a leadership position, the first thing that you need to do is learn. Learn, learn, learn! Whether it's wanting to fill a seat on a city council opening or feeling like you're ready to serve on a governing body and be part of the solution, the worst thing you do is come in thinking that you know everything. To me, it's 'learn first.' Learn first, and then once you've learned, prioritize, strategize, and then be prepared.

When they interviewed me here, that's what I told them.

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I don't consider myself to be an expert in anything, but I have a lot of people who I can draw on. These are folks that I've met over the years to help me avoid mistakes and what I need to do first is just thoroughly understand what's going on and why. Boyne City has become a kind of a mentor to this community because they were a little hole in the wall and now they've grown. They are on the west side, so they have some advantages that we don't. But their board and manager, the one thing that they stressed over and over and over again is one of the reasons they were able to have success is that they took calculated risks. They laid out the risks they were going to take and sometimes you fall on your face. But you get back up, dust yourself off and you take more calculated risks. Little by little, it comes along. So, every time we have something that does look potentially risky, I keep stressing that idea to them.

Then we can decide how we make things better or to lock in on what's most important. From the time I got here, we've literally laid everything on the table. We have a binder with a strategic plan that lists every single thing, from sidewalks and bike paths to the water system and the arts community. Literally everything is spelled out. Let's look at where we are, where we want to get to, and let's prioritize it. Then let's figure out how we're going to pay for it and that's kind of what we've done.

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From growing up here to now becoming the city manager, to me the biggest difference is the energy. It was always a small town, but there was so much energy when I was growing up. We had a lifeguard and the harbor was thriving. You'd go walk around and the parks were all filled. People were walking into town, or were on bikes. The school enrollment was bigger, so there was more youth around there. There were more fun businesses. We had an arcade with a foosball table and pinball machines. There was an energy here.

That's why I enjoyed it here growing up and I think it kind of slowly deteriorated and went away. That is what I think we need to address. The single biggest thing is bringing back that energy. There are many things we're going to need to do to actually be successful, but one of them is convincing our youth that this is a great place to be. Showing them that there are things here for them to do. Some of them are going to leave a small town and they're going to leave no matter what. But we need young people to be willing to take a chance and open a business, or buy one of the businesses that these older people have been running forever and have nobody to hand them down to.

We have retired folks that have already done their thing, and we need that entrepreneurial class to fill back in. To me, as you fill those storefronts, you see more people walking downtown and the marina is full again, the energy starts to come back. Honestly, some of the biggest energy I've seen here is the folks that came here and fell in love with it, or they're here because they want to be here. That's probably true of any community. But really and truly, the more folks we're able to attract and retain, people who are here because they really want to be here, the better it will be.

- Joe Hefelee, City manager of Rogers City

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