

Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

www.ci.norfolk.ne.us

November 29, 2011

“Jim Koch Retires”



There is no one more “street wise” than Jim Koch. After 34 years as the City of Norfolk Street Director and known across the country for his innovative snow removal plans and street department modernization, Koch will be retiring December 1.

When Koch came on the job in 1977, there was no emergency snow plan, the city was much smaller than it is now and most of the street jobs were done by hand and with gravel hauled in light duty trucks.

Through the years he has been an innovator in managing streets, having had his ideas published in industry publications and plans distributed at national conferences.

Originally from Winside, Koch received an associate’s degree from Norfolk Junior College and a bachelors degree from Chadron State and then taught and coached for five years. His part-time job in the summers doing surveying and engineering work for Consolidated Engineers and Architects in Wayne turned to a fulltime job when moving to Norfolk in the early 70’s.

Koch was later contacted about the City of Norfolk Street Director’s opening when Earl Smith, director for the last 14 years, was retiring and he was hired by a committee that included Don Hyde, City Engineer; Jim Miller, Mayor of Norfolk; and Paul Harm, Norfolk City Administrator.

Koch said his first task was to cut back staff. “We studied how we could do more with less,” Koch said.

The street department added on a preventative maintenance program in which three fulltime mechanics did oil changes and tune ups on almost all city vehicles.

In 1975 the city had a tremendous amount of snowfall and no organized system of removing it. Even the snow equipment was snowed in at the water treatment plant. Snowplows would follow one after another making slow progress.

“Prepare ahead of time” has been Koch’s motto. He designated certain streets as initial plowing routes and designed specific streets for snow plows to clear so that no street would always be the last plowed. Street departments around the nation have since duplicated Koch’s snow removal booklet that once included eight pages and has now expanded to 24.

Koch has taken more than a few calls from citizens through the years questioning why their streets aren't cleared sooner. "I've always cared about people and would've given anything to have that street to be cleaned off earlier. Some people's requests have been impossible to accomplish especially if they want their street always cleared first before 6:00 am in the morning," Koch said.

There are 144 miles of streets in the city but 432 lane miles of streets in the city as a snowplow can clear only one lane at a time. Koch explained that it may take three or four passes to clear one street. With a lot of snow, it may take six passes to get the snow removed.

Koch was one of the first managers in the nation to put his staff on a four day week from April to October - an initiative now copied by hundreds of cities.

"I've had a lot of great backing. If you do your homework, do background work and research and show how it can benefit the city, the administration will back you every time. I've worked under a great administration," Koch said.

The city council members over the years have approved Koch's ideas of using LED lights rather than incandescent lights for tremendous cost savings. They okayed his idea to hire someone to grind curbs so water wouldn't seep into the seam in the street and degrade the concrete.

In 2002, Koch proposed screening out the trash from the street cleaners rather than hauling all of it to the landfill. Since then, 97% of the street cleaning debris is recycled into dirt fill, a method also copied in other cities.

"With Mike Nolan (past city administrator) you couldn't be a backseat driver. I credit him with much of our success. He allowed us to be innovative," Koch said.

Five years ago, Koch also became head of storm water management for the city, a part of his job he said he really enjoyed. "It's interesting. It's new and it's very important. Some day the whole issue of storm water management will have to be a bigger part of city operations," Koch said.

Koch said in the future he also sees the need for more city staff as the city has not added street workers since before everything west of 25th street was built. There were 23 people in the street department when he came on and, even as Norfolk's population and number of streets has increased significantly, there are still only 22 people in the street division.

As for his future plans? He'd like to keep up with storm water issues, do some volunteering, and spend time with his family: Tracy, Iowa; Nicole, Georgia; and Trevor, Kerry and Kelly, all of Norfolk. Koch's wife, Jean, passed away in 2007 after 30 years of battling rheumatoid arthritis.

From Mike Nolan:

"Jim Koch is an exceptional person: one of the best division managers. His budgets were always well put together, and he had facts and reasons for every idea the Streets proposed. I thought about the many years we worked together. There were many, many examples of Jim's caliber; these are three of them.

1. During the 1983 blizzards, Norfolk received about 86 inches of snow. Three storms in a two-week interval were 20 inches or more. We quickly filled the snow deposit area near Winter Park and had to use Memorial Field for the overload. Public Works,

From Shane Weidner:

"Jim is our godfather of the street department and all the highways, byways and streets that run throughout our community. I have always been amazed by the wealth of knowledge Jim brought to a public works project. He has a fantastic mind and could describe in detail the process of street repair and maintenance with the technical and historic data to back it up. Jim will be sorely missed. We wish him all the best in retirement. Well deserved."

Streets and Administration were continually criticized by a portion of citizens who were as exasperated as we were by the inundation. Jim and the Street employees worked overtime continuously and performed heroically until we got through it. (At the employee Christmas party a year or so later I told the elected officials and employees that if Ronald Reagan decided to invade Grenada again, he would recruit the Street Division for the attack!)

2. The new vehicle maintenance building that was Jim Koch's vision and a substantial accomplishment of his legacy was constructed without property or sales tax funds, using a combination of gasoline tax and utility funds. This project evoked significant public opposition. Jim Koch maintained his professionalism throughout the ordeal and after a series of stories; city letters to the editor and public meetings, the furor subsided. The maintenance facility was state of the art and an effective tool to provide vehicle maintenance for the City's entire rolling stock. I am certain that the facility is the best of its kind among Nebraska cities of the first class.

3. Jim has extraordinary demeanor when times are tough. On a personal basis, he has had more than his share of sorrow. When his wife Jean died in 2007 after a long and difficult illness, Jim suffered his wife's death painfully but with composure. Throughout his mourning he was always there with a kind and caring word for others, despite his own loss."