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Larry Arft will complete 12 years as Beloit city manager upon retirement

By Gina Duwe

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BELOIT--Beloit City Manager Larry Arft could have retired years ago.

“I’ve been putting it off because I enjoy my job,” he said.

A series of milestones next summer seem like a “perfect alignment” to step away from a job that consumes 50 to 60 hours most weeks:

-- May will mark 40 consecutive years of Arft being a city manager somewhere.

-- In June, he'll complete his 12th year as Beloit's city manager and celebrate a 45th wedding anniversary with his wife, Karen.

-- In July, he turns 69.

Arft will step down from a city he said has gained national recognition for its downtown revitalization, developed a gateway industrial park that's retained and attracted new businesses at Interstate 90/39, made strides in reducing crime and improving neighborhoods and awaits approval of a casino that could bring 2,000 jobs to the city.

Arft's last day in the office will be June 3, and his retirement will be official a month later.

The city is expected to pick an executive recruiter early next month to begin the search for his replacement. The goal is to appoint a new city manager by early June so the new hire has time to work with Arft before he goes.

Arft and his wife plan to stay in Beloit and travel. He reflected on his Beloit tenure in an interview Thursday:

Q: *What projects are you most proud of?*

A: 1. The completion of the south end of Riverside Park, which included the relocation of Harris Ace Hardware to downtown. The city paid for market research and had to convince the business the downtown site was workable, and the city used two tax incremental financing districts as it worked through issues with the properties and relocation.

“This was a huge win for everybody,” Arft said, because Ace ended up in a new building in a great location, the city added a nationally known retailer downtown, and the city finished Riverside Park.

2. Rebuilding the park system, which “unfortunately had been allowed to deteriorate.” Some playgrounds weren't compliant with federal safety standards and most parks showed their age, he said.

3. The neighborhood preservation program, which introduced systematic, citywide code enforcement. The city also bought, remodeled and resold homes, some of which still are occupied by the same owners. Another series of initiatives followed to buy foreclosed properties to help strengthen neighborhoods.

Q: *Is there more cooperation and less competition between Beloit and Janesville?*

A: Yes. The competition still exists, but at “a far more friendly level.”

He said the cities have a more collegial relationship. As evidence, he pointed to joint purchasing, the cities' coordinated response to emerald ash borer, efforts with Rock County on animal control, creation of the Rock County Communications Center and joint economic development efforts.

“We have a very, very good, close relationship,” he said. “I think it's improved dramatically.”

Q: *Crime is the first thing that comes to mind when some people think of Beloit. What challenges and improvements have you seen?*

A: An interjurisdictional law enforcement task force has been “very successful” taking drug dealers and gang members off the street, he said. The city had several years of relatively little violent crime until this past summer, when a plague of gun violence struck, often in clusters.

“It's been traumatic for the entire city and its population,” he said.

He said he's not sure what triggered the targeted crimes.

He hopes people don't judge the city of 37,000 based on a handful of crimes involving a dozen or so people.

Q: *What do you predict and hope for Beloit's future?*

A: “There's too much momentum and too many engaged citizens for the city to take a wrong turn,” he said. “I don't see the city going back, as you saw this summer with the crime wave.”

While there are always backward steps, momentum will carry the city forward, he said.

“I'm very, very hopeful and optimistic the next city manager will have that same passion and feel for creating quality urban places and that person will build on the base that's here and take us to the next level,” he said. “I'm very excited to see that happen.”