Matthew Schooley, City Manager, called the 2020 Leadership Planning Session of the Alma City Commission to order at 8:07 a.m. at the Alma Public Library.

Commissioners present: Mapes, Mott, Harrington, Stahl, Allman, and Piccolo.
Commissioners absent: Pitts.


City Manager Schooley opened the meeting with an explanation of the purpose of the meeting: to establish a list of goals and priorities to continue to make Alma a better place to live and work.

Schooley went on to say that one of the biggest issues facing cities now is lead and copper contamination and the “Lead-Copper Rule”. A team from OHM was present for the meeting to explain the challenges involved.

David Ringle, Public Services Director, introduced the team from OHM: John Tanner, Greg Marker, and Lou Fleury. Ringle said he had been attending sessions about the new mandates regarding lead contamination. The reality is there will be a big impact on local governments, but the public’s health and welfare are a priority. Corrections to the problems have been delegated to local municipalities, but no additional funding has been provided.

Greg Marker spoke about the rule and what the immediate future holds. He explained he has been watching this rule since its inception. The Lead-Copper Rule sets new standards for municipality owned lines as well as privately owned service leads from the curb stop to the house. A desktop preliminary inventory of lead service lines within the City was due by January 1, 2020, using existing information. In-home water sampling and resident notifications are included as requirements under the new rule. By January 1, 2021, municipalities are required to begin inventorying lead service lines. Verified inventory of lead service lines is due by January 1, 2025. Once lines have been verified, they must be replaced at a rate of 5% per year.

Water sampling consists of five separate liters of water drawn from a home. The first liter is indicative of the makeup of the service line. The fifth liter is used to determine what is in the home’s plumbing lines. City staff will likely have to perform all of the testing to get true samples.

A coalition of 49 communities set out to fight the rule, but a declaratory judgment denied the claim in October of 2018. Major issues include:

- Public monies used for private replacement
- Replacement timeline
- Lead action level not based on science
- MDEQ underestimated cost in regulatory impact statement (MDEQ estimates $500 million, but industry estimates $2.5 billion)
One of the issues is increasing fees and identifying other potential funding sources. Temporary easements/permission to enter property must be considered as well as what recourse the City will have if a property owner denies access.

While costs are estimated to be anywhere from $3500 to $5500 per line, they could easily soar to $15,000 or more if a porch or difficult landscaping is involved. Partial replacements are not allowed under the Rule.

Marker called for questions, and discussion followed about possible ways to handle denied access, and what would happen if the City failed to follow the Rule. Marker said the state could pull the City’s permit to provide water to citizens, and Ringle noted Water Plant staff would likely lose licenses for failure to comply. Other questions included how to stop a resident from selling a house after denying access, and could the cost be amortized over a period of years.

Ringle estimates anywhere from 370 to 2500 replacements may be required. We have accurate data back to the year 2000, but no data is available about private lines, so “pot-holing” will be necessary to test lines for content. Marker said at a 5% replacement rate, the costs would be approximately $250,000 per year based on conservative estimates. Assistant City Manager, Aeric Ripley, noted costs could be much higher if there is a lack of available contractors. Mayor Greg Mapes suggested a $10.00 surcharge on water bills to raise $250,000 a year. Marker explained the $250,000 is only an estimate and doesn’t cover the costs of sampling.

Mapes asked if the mains are safe. Marker said the mains are safe. Joints could be an issue but pose very little risk as the surface area exposed is minimal compared with service lines. Additional discussion followed about the City’s liability for replacing private property and documentation of changes. Schooley said the goal is good communication with property owners and ultimately, doing what’s best for the health and safety of City residents.

Discussion followed about the origin of the rule, water sampling, and how other communities are approaching the new regulations.

The group recessed for a brief break at 9:15 a.m. and reconvened at 9:30 a.m.

John Tanner of OHM explained the proposed and potential construction and improvements to the Waste Water Treatment Plant and to the sanitary sewer collection system. Inventory has been completed and mapped as part of the SAW Grant. The majority of the system is old, but in relatively good shape for its age. The Plan will be used to assess risk of failure, and prepare a capital improvement plan, or a plan for replacement. The study offered three different scenarios for improvements. Ringle noted some improvements will be necessary in the next five years to keep up with the changing makeup of the product coming into the plant. Mapes asked about raising rates to build a fund that could be used for improvements. Kathy Phillips, Finance Director, said that is under consideration already. Ringle said this Plan is the culmination of a five year SAW Grant process.
Schooley thanked OHM for attending and providing much needed information, and then he moved on to discussion about establishing goals and priorities for Alma. The OHM team members left the meeting.

Schooley suggested four areas for discussion:

- What’s good about Alma right now?
- What’s working?
- What’s not so good about Alma right now?
- What’s not working?

Some responses to the question about what’s good included improvements to infrastructure, and communications. There are great changes happening downtown. Mapes said he believes the negative attitudes are changing for the better. Piccolo said we have always been an “other shoe” community, always waiting for the other shoe to drop. Schooley agreed but said he is also starting to see attitudes change. Phillips commented that as a new member of the community, she believes there are many special things about Alma that are not always recognized. Others agreed and discussed additional improvements, changes, and good things going for Alma.

Schooley said that over the years, Alma has taken on many roles because no one else would step up, but he would like to shift focus back to Alma, because a strong Alma will help make a strong Gratiot County.

Discussion moved to what’s not so good about Alma. Some suggestions included improved communication between the City and residents, and better waste collection systems. Piccolo noted we have many difficult financial decisions ahead and communication to the public will be crucial.

Mapes suggested addressing some of the “little things” to improve appearances, but Ringle said that when his staff is addressing little things, the important things get left behind. Staffing limitations and funding limits are a problem. Schooley said these would be good items to keep in mind as we tap into local volunteers. Stahl proposed changing the community meetings to community clean up events and encouraging local volunteers.

Discussion followed about railroads and railroad crossings. Ringle explained that the City has no recourse when it comes to the condition of rail crossings. They are owned and controlled by the rail companies, and we cannot legally make improvements.

Schooley asked what’s not working or what should we be doing that we are not. Discussion followed about adequate training for City staff, and improved policies and procedures. Mapes asked if the culture was improving. Schooley said we are not necessarily the roadblock to progress anymore. He gives credit to staff for improving access and looking forward to the future.

Rhonda Rohr said the hard part is letting people know we will work with them. She suggested a PR person. Schooley said he does think people are starting to see we are open to change. He believes there is not one person on the administrative staff who is not 100% committed to Alma.
Schooley moved on to talk about the Alma Aspires Plan and how it came about. He said the group is a collection of leaders and volunteers in Alma working to help Alma reach its full potential. Topics for Alma Aspires are People, Place, and Prosperity. Committees have been formed to address goals determined by the Alma Aspires meeting attendees. He encouraged everyone to participate in some of the Committees.

The group recessed for lunch at 11:20 a.m. and reconvened at 11:40 a.m.

Commissioner Allman left the meeting at 11:45 a.m.

The group worked together to list the greatest challenges facing the City.

- Manpower
- Technology
- Infrastructure including parks and parking lots

Discussion followed about parking lots and parks. Ripley said some of the parking lots haven’t seen any work in 30 years. They need to become a priority with increased traffic in the downtown area and funding is needed. Ripley also said we have received a grant for some of the park bathrooms, but one of the decks over the dam needs to be replaced and the estimated cost is $90,000. Ringle said at this point we are only able to do maintenance at the parks, there isn’t any extra money for improvements.

Schooley talked about the county parks millage and explained some of the discussions about sharing the millage with local units. An 80/20 split wouldn’t provide much money to each local unit for improvements. There has been a suggestion that Gratiot County reduce their millage and allow local units to seek their own millage for parks and recreation. Mapes said he thought there was a good chance that a local millage could pass.

The group continued to name challenges facing the City.

- River
- Public perception
- Resources/Time
- Funding
- Support of Alma Aspires
- Safety

Brief discussion followed each suggestion. Schooley asked for help taking these suggestions and setting priorities. Piccolo noted there are just some things that will have to take priority. Some of the priorities have been forced on us from outside sources, such as infrastructure. Schooley said some things to consider included timing, whether a project is worthwhile, and if it will meet our goals. The following items were identified as priorities.
Manpower
• Sufficient staffing to meet demands
• Training
• Preparing for pension liabilities
• Supporting community initiatives

Infrastructure
• Meeting regulatory requirements
• Improving parks
• Improving parking lots
• Safety

Technology
• Identifying what we have
• Identifying what we can bring & committing to it
• Finding funding for improvements

Schooley said he would take the information and put it together as a list of priorities and direction. He thanked everyone for their attention and their work.

The meeting adjourned at 12:35 p.m.