

After nearly 35 years of shaping Coralville, City Engineer Dan Holderness retires



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Dan Holderness is photographed outside the Intermodal Transportation Center in Coralville's River Landing on Tuesday, March 30, 2021. Holderness is retiring on March 31. He has had an impact on several of the major development projects in Coralville, including overseeing the EPA's Brownfield Grants that helped fund the IRL's development. (Rebecca F. Miller/The Gazette)



CORALVILLE - You'd be hard pressed to find a corner of Coralville that Dan Holderness hasn't touched.

Thanks to the community's growth and his nearly 35 years as city engineer - he's Coralville's longest-tenured employee - Holderness has had a hand in many large infrastructure projects.

That list includes work on the city's water plant twice, redoing the wastewater plant twice, two new water towers and the rebuilding the Highway 6 and First Avenue intersection three times.

On top of that, Holderness has helped the city respond to four floods and oversaw more than \$70 million in flood improvements after 2008. His work with the Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfields Program paved the way for the Iowa River Landing development.

"Wastewater system, water system, streets, trails, our green spaces - every one of those had Dan's imprint on them," Coralville City Administrator Kelly Hayworth said. "All of those things are a city engineer's dream. But the fact that Dan did it multiple times because of our growth is what's really unusual."

"I've been fortunate to be involved in a lot of major developments in the city," said Holderness, who retires today. "I think it's time for someone else to take over."

A native of Millersburg and a graduate of Iowa State University, Holderness was hired at Coralville's city engineer in July 1986 after working for a consulting firm and the city of Iowa City. Holderness said he was attracted to the diversity of the job, getting to be involved in road and sewer projects, parks and trails and development review.

In Coralville, Holderness saw a community poised for growth. Its population was around 6,000 at the time and has now grown to roughly 23,000.

"It provided a lot of opportunities," he said. "I got to do a lot of different things over the years."

In addition to infrastructure projects, Holderness managed the EPA Brownfields Program for Coralville. Under Holderness, the city has received 14 EPA grants - the fifth most in the country - to assess properties which were contaminated and difficult to develop.

Through those \$2.5 million grants, the city transformed a former industrial site into the Iowa River Landing, which represents an investment of \$460 million in public and private funds.

The EPA grants 'laid the groundwork for the Iowa River Landing," Coralville Mayor John Lundell said. 'Without those investigational studies and improvements ... nothing would be built down there.'

Added Lundell: 'There are improvements all over Coralville that have Dan's name on them.'

Approximately \$70 million worth of improvements that now protect Coralville - up to 1 foot above the 2008 flood - also were implemented under Holderness' leadership.

Hayworth said it's hard to picture the level of devastation Coralville and other communities along the Iowa River witnessed during 2008. In Coralville, there was a question of whether residents and businesses impacted by the flood would ever return.

Hayworth said Holderness used real-time flood data to figure out how to protect the city against future flooding.

'In the middle of the floods, while a lot of us - Dan included - were fighting the floods, he was planning,' Hayworth said. 'How can we fix this?'

By October 2008, thanks to work done in the middle of the flood, Coralville had a mitigation strategy in place.

'Dan came up with the plan,' Hayworth said. 'He was just a steady force through that whole thing. He never got excited.'

Holderness credits the consistency in leadership in Coralville - from Hayworth to other department heads and elected officials, many of whom have decades of experience with the city.

'You build a level of trust,' Holderness said. 'You build a level of understanding. ... I think it really fosters a higher quality of development in the city. It helps us move forward better and more efficiently.'

Holderness will be succeeded as city engineer by another long-term Coralville employee. Scott Larson, who has worked with the city since 1993 and was assistant city engineer.

In retirement, Holderness said he looks forward to traveling with his wife once the pandemic subsides and looking after his mother, who still lives on the family farm in Millersburg.

He hopes he's remembered in Coralville as someone who led responsible development and brought new and exciting things to Coralville, including the Iowa River Landing.

'I'm really going to miss the people,' he said. 'I'm sure here for a while when I hear the bulldozers fire up ... it's going to be kind of a mixed blessing. I'm going to miss being involved in the activities.'

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