

One of my guilty pleasures is a website known as 11foot8.com. It's a series of webcam videos of a bridge where the clearance is only, you guessed it, 11 feet, 8 inches. Many trucks and RVs exceed that height. Despite warning signs, flashing lights, and even a steel I-beam painted bright yellow mounted up front that protects the bridge, you can see 130 videos of vehicles getting wedged under the bridge.

It always reminds me of an old anecdote about a truck stuck under a bridge. The truck was too tall to fit, but the driver tried it anyway. Perhaps he wasn't paying attention or maybe he was using the power of positive thinking. At any rate, he got that truck wedged in there pretty good.

Out came the police, firefighters, and highway workers to see what they needed to do to get the truck un-wedged. Perhaps they needed a crane, a tow truck, or maybe a saw to cut the truck free. The debate continued and time went by. Traffic was backing up, so people were getting angry and impatient, as you can imagine.

Then a little girl happened by on a bike. She called over, "Let the air out of the tires."

The moral of the story to me, besides you should know the height of your vehicle before you drive it, is that sometimes there is a simple way to solve problems if you look for it.

In 2008 the College employees and Board, along with help from many of you in the community, created a Facilities Master Plan for the Chanute Campus. The purpose of the plan was to visualize what the college might look like over the next 20-30 years, adding new capabilities, while addressing some of our biggest problems.

It is a grand plan calling for a greatly expanded Student Union with a huge new dining hall solving the issue of overcrowding there. The plan adds administrative offices and a giant indoor practice facility for student-athletes. There is a new technical education building, too. New parking lots and outdoor features, such as plazas and fountains, dot the updated and modern visualized campus.

We have used that plan to create the softball complex and the new road and parking near the library as well as the drop-off area for Sanders Hall. All of these advancements have benefited visitors and students through better access to the buildings.

But the plan has a problem. Or rather about 30-40 million problems. That's the estimated cost to complete the plan - about \$30-40 million dollars – ouch! If you have been following my articles you may recall that also in 2008 the State stopped giving us additional money, and, in fact, has cut community colleges about 6% over the last 10 years. So we are getting less general fund money from the state now than we did when the plan was created. Ten years of no additional funds and cuts from the state would be hard to imagine in 2008, but it is a reality now, with no real relief in sight.

Today it is looking less and less likely that the full vision of that plan is going to come into fruition. However, the problems identified in 2008 that the plan would solve still remain today. So how can we take a little air out of that grand vision and still accomplish many of those goals?

This week at the Board meeting, we think we have done just that, through a relatively small purchase and a wonderful gift. The Trustees have voted to purchase a 64,000 square foot facility in the industrial park, formally known as Midwest Cabinets for only \$275,000. The owners, JEB, donated the remaining value of the building to the college, which is a handsome gift indeed! Thank you JEB!

For the college, that works out to about \$4 a square foot for the building. If you know about building costs, that's an incredible deal! In fact, we were looking at building a 4,000 square foot storage facility in a few years which was going to cost \$200,000 alone. That would have been \$50 a square foot, just to give you a comparison. \$4 is quite a bargain!

The funds for the purchase came from our out-district fee, which is collected from students who live outside of Neosho County. We are not using general fund, and therefore no tax money, for the purchase. In recent years we have used that fee to fix up our nursing and science labs, as well as put in the softball field and for the majority of the funds for the baseball complex.

This building will solve four of the college's needs.

The first need is future expansion of Career and Technical Education (CTE) classes. If we were to add new programs to the college, especially those programs that take up a lot of space, we would have to build new construction which would be very expensive compared with renovating this new building we purchased. As it was a working factory, the conversion to CTE space will be relatively inexpensive with advanced power, ventilation, and loading docks already on site. That means the potential for more workforce programs and more people getting good paying jobs.

The next need is an indoor athletic practice facility. Currently all of our outdoor teams share one indoor facility, the gym, with almost all of our indoor teams. This can lead to great difficulty and scheduling issues, especially in bad weather or through the winter months. It greatly limits practice times and usage of the gym by outside groups. More importantly, many student-athletes have to practice during "prime time" for classes on the Chanute Campus, which means they often have to take evening or online classes, when that might not be their first choice, just to get a full schedule. It is hoped that this new facility will allow for more options in class schedules for students. The building has a large "clear span" section, without center posts, which could be easily converted to practice space. The facility would be used by baseball, softball, men's and women's soccer, and men's and women's cross country/track and field, but will be open to all teams who would like to use it, as well as other clubs, grant programs, and student activities.

And we need storage space. While not exciting per se, this is a big need of the college. Several of our departments must pay for storage of their items as there is no room on campus for additional storage of materials or anything donated. We were only going to build 4,000 square feet of storage, now we will have a lot more space for about the same money. Additionally, this facility will be used to store the college mini bus and the mobile Certified Nursing Assistant Lab.

Lastly we need more office space. This new building comes with 3,200 sq. feet of finished office space. We have some employees sharing offices now, which is not ideal. However the real advantage is the opportunity to free up space in the Student Union. If this happens more issues can be solved through less expensive renovation instead of costly new construction, such as the possibility of expanding the dining hall over the next few years. That facility is very over crowded. Anyone who has joined us for senior lunch on Thursdays or for the Sunday brunch on Mother's Day knows how crowded it can get.

In a perfect world that multi-million dollar long-term vision of the college would be happening piece by piece. Unfortunately, the situation has changed. Good leadership now calls for creative problem-solving, of adding new capabilities without adding large costs or, especially, debt. I was so thankful for JEB for bringing us this opportunity. And I'm excited that the Trustees voted to move forward. It has the potential of solving many problems without breaking the budget.

That long-term vision is still there. The plan has not been deleted, and we may return to it to see it happen. But I'm very excited to report the problems are getting addressed now, not the mythical, "someday." And not for \$35 million either, but a whole lot less.

Yes, we let some air out of the tires, and the truck will keep moving forward!

If you have any questions or comments for me about this or anything else, please feel free to contact me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).