

**Collected Columns of 2011 by Mike Bryson**

Published in as Common Sense op-ed articles in the *Joliet Herald News*

**JJC's Downtown Campus Should Honor the Past, but Define the Future**

3 February 2011

(Published as "JJC Plan Should Be Bold, Green" in the *Joliet Herald News*, p13)

Last week as I walked down Chicago Street in downtown Joliet on my way to work, a giant crane -- the jaws of its bucket suspended high in the cold gray winter sky -- began the demolition of The White Store.

Here in America, we're good at a lot of things. One of them is knocking down buildings we consider to be worn out, old-fashioned, and/or irrelevant. Some of these structures were admittedly unremarkable in their architecture; others, though, were beautiful in design and possessed historical significance. One need only study the sorry history of lost buildings in Chicago to realize this.

The imminent razing of Joliet's 102-year-old White Store signals an end to the occasionally controversial debate over its fate, but is also an apt moment to pause and reflect on what kind of building should take its place in Joliet Junior College's downtown campus redevelopment.

Fortunately, JJC's project is not an isolated endeavor, but part of their comprehensive master plan for the institution's growth and evolution. Another factor is that the building design has not been finalized, to my knowledge.

Consequently, I offer the following humble suggestions to the project's leaders, with the caveat that I am neither an architect nor an urban planner -- merely an interested citizen.

(1) Go local. The Chicago region has a long and illustrious architectural history, and is exceedingly rich in design talent and building innovation. The downtown campus redevelopment could be a showcase project for a deserving firm, tie Joliet's contemporary cityscape into that regional architectural legacy, and in the process feed the northeastern Illinois economy.

(2) Make it green. With its LEED-certified greenhouse as well as other campus sustainability initiatives, JJC is leaping to the forefront of environmentally progressive colleges and universities. Building a model green structure would further this momentum, and create an environmental destination in downtown Joliet (much like notable green buildings draw visitors and media to other cities).

(3) Be bold. This building must be special -- a visual statement possessing flair and integrity. It should be unique in character and well-fitted to its purpose, yet harmonize with the heterogeneous architectural landscape of downtown. The last thing the world needs is another functional yet blasé box of a building.

(4) Get lucky. The State's financial house is crumbling as fast as The White Store is, leaving JJC's funding prospects uncertain. A miraculous economic turnaround in Illinois wouldn't hurt, would it?

*Mike Bryson of Joliet gladly takes two-cent contributions at [mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net).*

**Election 2011: Queasy Bellies, Budgetary Woes, and Joliet's Next Mayor**  
10 March 2011

(Published as "What We'll Need from Next Mayor" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p14)

Anyone who's read a newspaper lately knows that the stakes of the upcoming Joliet elections are incredibly high. Among the many herculean tasks ahead is dealing with our runaway city budget, which is a 27-million-dollar-deficit train wreck in the making.

Such is the number one priority for Joliet's mayor, a critically important job up for grabs for the first time in 20 years with the retirement of Art Schultz, who surely picked a fortuitous time to step down.

Schultz's under-the-radar governing style belies the widely influential role of the mayor's office, which for starters makes appointment to a wide range of powerful governmental bodies, including Joliet's Housing Authority, Plan Commission, and Zoning Board of Appeals.

The mayor also doubles as the city's liquor commissioner, giving him or her considerable leverage and clout within the business community.

Most political media attention in Joliet rightly focuses on the the City Council, which controls the budget, makes laws, settles zoning debates, approves development projects, etc. Yet the mayor's key role in the Council often goes unappreciated. As the ninth voting member and nominal chair of the Council, the mayor can shape the tone and substance of the Council's debates, as well as cast a tie-breaking vote on any divisive issue.

Lastly, a vital intangible: the responsibility of articulating a compelling vision of Joliet's present identity and future potential. In this capacity, the mayor should be a dynamic ambassador and advocate -- the face of our city to the larger world.

So here's my "must-haves" list for our next mayor:

-- Leadership: shockingly, any democratic body will become dysfunctional without effective management. Given that our newly-elected Council will face a host of unprecedented challenges on Day One, the mayor's leadership skills are absolutely critical, especially since there might be some rookie members on the dais.

-- Integrity: vested with the power of political appointment, the mayor needs to put the best-qualified people on our civic commissions. We deserve no less.

-- Vision: no single person has more power to shape the future of Joliet. The mayor must communicate a positive and progressive plan for our city, one I hope will be rooted in principles of sustainable development, fiscal responsibility, and social equity.

-- Guts: solving Joliet's budget crisis will take courage, resolve, and quite possibly a very strong stomach.

That last thing might be handy for voters, too. See you at the polls on April 5<sup>th</sup>.

*Mike Bryson of Joliet (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) encourages his fellow citizens to follow the Herald-News profiles of Joliet's mayoral candidates and to vote in the upcoming election.*

## **A Sad and Pitiful Embarrassment**

14 April 2011

(Published as "Lame Excuses for Pitiful Turnout" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p13)

My fellow citizens, where were you last Tuesday?

Behold this sad and pitiful statistic: 21%. That's the proportion of registered Joliet voters who actually bothered to cast a ballot, despite a heated mayoral and city council election campaign and a looming city budget crisis.

I know, I know. Spring elections just aren't as exciting as the autumnal variety. Without big-ticket draws of state and federal offices up for grabs, it's hard to motivate yourself to perform the arduous task of going to your neighborhood polling place and spending seven minutes filling out a simple form.

That's too bad, because your civic disengagement plays right into the hands of status-quo politicians, who largely ignore your legitimate needs and instead cater to powerful special interests.

"But what about the old and infirm?" you might object. "Don't they drag down the numbers?" You might assume so. Yet historically, seniors typically record very high voter participation rates among various age groups. They aren't the problem.

"That's because they have so much free time," you reply. "I'm too busy." I'm sure you are. That's why the polls stay open late, and the County bends over backwards to give people every opportunity to vote early or by absentee ballot. So don't give me that lame excuse.

"Well, the candidates stunk. None of 'em deserved my vote." Oh, really? That's pure poppycock. No political candidate in American history has been perfect, except for George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. (Nope, scratch that -- they were lifelong slave-owners. I count that as a substantial imperfection.) Sometimes you just have to hold your nose and choose someone who'll do the least harm.

"But my vote is just one vote," you whine. "How can it matter?" While I'm somewhat sensitive to your underlying disillusionment with our admittedly flawed political process, such an attitude flies in the face of recent historical facts. Important elections have, in fact, been decided on razor-thin margins. Remember Florida and Bush vs. Gore in 2000? (Of course you don't.)

Here's what all your excuses add up to: feeble rationalizations for inaction and irresponsibility. They are slaps in the face to generations of women and people of color in this country who were long denied the privilege you so cavalierly dismiss, as well as to the thousands upon thousands of veterans who gave their lives on our behalf.

Sermon's over. You may resume watching your favorite TV show.

*Mike Bryson of Joliet accepts two-cent contributions emailed to mbry22@sbcglobal.net.*

## Sustainability's in the Air These Days

19 May 2011

(Published as "Festival Celebrates What's Green" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p14)

In case you haven't heard the news, one of this spring's biggest events is happening this coming Saturday, May 21<sup>st</sup>, at Joliet's Black Road Library. It's the GR2011 Sustainability Festival, a family-friendly celebration of nature, green technology and innovation, recycling, and environmental conservation.

Based on the tremendous and somewhat unexpected success of last year's inaugural festival, GR2011 should be even bigger and better. And with an impressive line-up of live music as well as local food vendors, the Festival is living proof that that promoting environmentalism and having fun aren't mutually exclusive pursuits.

Even more importantly, in the year since the Forest Preserve District of Will County, the Joliet Public Library, Joliet Junior College, and the City of Joliet collaborated on GR2010, the Joliet region has continued to take meaningful steps toward becoming an environmentally progressive and more sustainable community. That movement is part of a larger wellspring of environmental activism throughout the Chicago area, from the inner city to the outer suburbs.

Consider just a few representative examples here at home. Tonight at the Black Road Library is a free screening of the film, "Fresh," which profiles farmers and food entrepreneurs who have developed creative approaches to sustainable agriculture, from CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) to small-scale urban farms. The event is the fourth of weekly screenings leading up to GR2011, a film series that has been a refreshing addition to the city's cultural scene.

Two other key players on the local sustainability scene are JJC and USF, both of which are undertaking a variety of environmental initiatives. I visited JJC on their Earth Day celebration last month, and spoke with several students and faculty who are passionate about environmental stewardship, green design, and sustainable agriculture. With the college emerging as a regional leader in campus greening initiatives, faculty there are starting to collaborate on an exciting new sustainability course for next fall.

Meanwhile, USF and the recently-lauded grassroots organization Cool Joliet have broken ground on a community garden along busy Plainfield Road on the city's near-West Side. The newly-constructed raised beds herald the forthcoming transformation of this neglected vacant lot into a productive green space.

Cool Joliet is also working on a similar garden at nearby Farragut school, which reportedly will be one of several school gardens planned in District 86. This bodes well for the 11,000 children in the district, as such gardens not only beautify school grounds, but also serve as multidisciplinary learning laboratories, points of contact with nature, and much-needed sources of fresh produce.

All these efforts show that sustainability is not just a trendy buzzword or an abstract concept. It's a practical and fundamentally positive approach to environmental stewardship that foregrounds green entrepreneurship and social justice.

Don't just read about it here, though. Come to the GR2011 Festival on Saturday and see for yourself!

*GR2011 Festival info: <http://www.celebratingsustainability.com/>. Mike Bryson of Joliet (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) co-founded the Sustainability Studies program at Roosevelt University in 2010.*

## Time To Lock Down on Budget Talks

28 July 2011

(Published as "When Will Joliet Officials Deal with \$27 Million Deficit?"  
in the Joliet *Herald-News*)

Ever since last April's elections, I've been waiting for some blockbuster news to come out of City Hall in downtown Joliet. Now it's late July, and though the outside temperature's in the 90s, things are mighty cool in the city's governmental chambers. So cool, in fact, one might think all's well in the land of casinos, racetracks, and intermodal shipping container transfer centers.

But this deafening silence from Joliet's leadership worries me a tad. I can't help but wonder what we've been doing about that teensy little \$27 million budget deficit projection for 2012.

Sure, there's been some encouraging news from other quarters. Just last week Joliet scored a \$820,000 grant from the Illinois EPA for upgrading its sewage infrastructure in order to significantly reduce the amount of untreated waste we routinely dump into the Des Plaines River. As an enthusiastic proponent of minimizing combined sewage overflow events, I'm sincerely impressed.

Also laudable is State Senator Wilhelmi's recent tour of the Joliet Correctional Facility with a bevy of high-ranking state officials, an effort to underscore the need for preserving one of Joliet's key historical and architectural assets. It's possible to imagine Joliet someday making some tourism industry hay, Alcatraz-style, from its uneasy international reputation as a prison town.

There's only one little hitch: raising the tens of millions necessary to secure and restore the monumental but crumbling limestone structure. By comparison, breaking out of jail is child's play.

The subject of money leads me back to that \$27 million deficit looming in front of us.

Again, it's been almost four months since the April election. Our fiscal clock is ticking very loudly. Where is the budget crisis mitigation plan from our City Council? What is Mayor Giarrante doing to lead this critical effort?

I have a couple of friendly suggestions for City Manager Tom Thanas, whose job surely must be one of the most stressful in Will County. First, reassign the brilliant technocrat who wrote that blockbuster EPA wastewater grant to plugging the leaks in the city's budget, which surely could use some re-engineering.

Secondly, get in touch with Senator Wilhelmi and see if you can hold a special budget meeting in the old Joliet Prison, where the peeling paint, rusting cell bars, and weed-filled exercise yards are evocative symbols of neglect and decay -- and a grim foreshadowing of the city's future if we cannot put our fiscal house in order.

Perhaps such a setting will impart the proper sense of seriousness and urgency the situation demands. And if some of Joliet's well-compensated police officers could patrol the grounds to make sure that no Councilman or Councilwoman escapes until an initial plan is hammered out, all the better.

*Joliet resident Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) is happy to forward your budget crisis solutions to Mayor Giarrante and company. Or, you can just email them yourself.*

## **From the City to the Country: Visiting the Will County Fair**

4 Sept 2011

(Published as "County Fair a Crucial Connection" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p26)

Late every August, my family performs a sacred ritual. We get up early, eat a stout breakfast, then drive east from our urban homestead in Joliet out into the countryside. Our destination: Peotone, Illinois -- home of the utterly splendid Will County Fair.

Though big as the world to a child's eye, the fair is a small and wholesome event that looks and feels like a journey back in time. It features all the classic Midwestern fair elements -- deep-fried elephant ears, carnival rides, a baby contest, live music, a rodeo, tractor pulls, magic shows, a demolition derby -- without the aggressively seedy atmosphere created by over-the-hill 80s rock bands or, worse yet, grandstanding politicians.

Best of all, Will County's fair puts agriculture front and center, as it should be. From the fairground's main parking lot, you can buy your admission ticket and walk right into the Swine Barn -- an arrangement both excellent and deeply symbolic.

The Will County Fair is where city kids like our two girls can get up close and personal with goats, chickens, dairy cows, beef cattle, hogs, sheep, horses, ponies, turkeys, geese, and pigeons -- wonderful livestock all.

Airy old barns dominate half the fairgrounds, and we strolled through the long corridors of stalls for several hours to see the animals, scratch their heads, thump their bellies, take in the pleasantly pungent smell of manure, and chat with the farm kids who tend these beasts with skill and devotion. This is 100% fun, and the type of education you can't get in school or from a book.

And the food? Boy, oh boy. We ate burgers and fries from the 4-H stand run by a enthusiastic squadron of teenagers, portabella mushroom sandwiches and marinated veggies expertly grilled by Farmer John Moore of Wind N' Oaks Farm, ice cream from the Peotone United Methodist Church ladies, and some sinfully delicious corn dogs.

I wonder how many city folk head to Peotone each year to connect with Will County's still-thriving but increasingly pressured rural heritage. Year after year our civic leaders race to pave over our fertile farmland according to the economic gospel of "development." From the vantage point of the county fairgrounds, though, the foolhardy and state-sanctioned land grab called the Peotone Airport looms as an exquisitely ironic example of misguided priorities.

Maybe more of our urban and suburban citizens, and especially our politicians, should spend some quality time in the livestock barns visiting with farmers and the 4-H kids who live and work on our county's farms. It might provide some much-needed perspective on balancing economic development with the preservation of rural culture.

The only bad thing about the 108<sup>th</sup> Will County Fair? Having to leave. We're already looking forward to next year.

*Send Joliet resident Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) your stories and comments about the pleasures of county fairs, the state of Illinois agriculture, and the future of America.*

**Is Joliet a Real City or Not?**  
**Reflections on Arts Funding in Times of Economic Crisis**  
6 Oct 2011

(Published as "Can Joliet Afford To Neglect the Arts?" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p13)

After a summer of disconcerting inaction on Joliet's \$23 million shortfall for 2012, budget deliberations in City Hall have really heated up.

Mayor Tom Giarrante's proposed plan combines tax hikes, service cuts, pension payment restructuring, and planned negotiations with employee unions as a means of bringing down expenditures; and the Council, much to the delight of Joliet residents, has voted to raise sales and utility taxes in order to generate more revenue.

Getting an inordinate amount of attention in the local press as well as in Council deliberations, though, are potential cuts to Joliet's less-than-lavish support of the Rialto Square Theater, the Joliet Area Historical Museum, and Bicentennial Park. The mayor proposes relatively modest decreases for these important cultural institutions, while District 1 Councilman Larry Hug advocates slashing city support entirely.

Hug's attitude is hardly surprising. Whenever economic times get tough, public expenditures on the arts always come under the gun. But the reasoning behind these potential cutbacks is both mathematically misguided and philosophically impoverished.

Let's do the math first. The mayor's proposed cuts to the above arts organizations total \$266,000 -- less than two percent of the city's \$17 million gap in operating expenses. Giarrante's strategy here is plainly symbolic: while such reductions are admittedly ineffectual because they're so small, they demonstrate his willingness to make tough decisions across the board.

Ironically, the draconian "cut everything" approach espoused by Hug would not generate all that many savings, either, and could potentially hurt the local economy. Take the Rialto: eliminating its \$700,000 of city support trims only four percent from that \$17 million shortfall. Yet that would be potentially devastating to the Rialto's always precarious operating budget, and thus jeopardize the \$7.5 million of local economic activity it generates annually.

But let's also think beyond mere numbers. What would Joliet be like without Bicentennial Park's music concerts, dramatic productions, and cultural festivals? Without the rich perspective on the our area's culture and history provided by the much-lauded Historical Museum?

How would the otherwise depressing and downtrodden downtown landscape look without the glitz, energy, and architectural pizzazz of the iconic Rialto, Joliet's only serious venue for nationally-renowned live entertainment?

Oh, sure, life would go on. The garbage would be picked up (on the street, not in the alley), sewage would be processed, and the lights would stay on in City Hall. But a culturally-impooverished existence in which the arts are devalued and unfunded is neither desirable nor acceptable in a city of our size and aspirations.

The question we should be asking, then, is not how much we can slash and burn the already paltry public support of our cornerstone arts organizations and cherished cultural institutions. It's rather this: what kind of city do we want to live in?

*Disclosure: Joliet resident Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) supports the above organizations with his private dollars as well as tax payments.*

## **Which Is Funnier: Jerry Seinfeld or the Joliet Budget Proceedings?**

10 November 2011

(Published as "Lack of Support for Rialto No Laughing Matter"  
in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p15)

Two weeks ago my wife and I took a rare break from our humdrum lives as sleep-deprived and chore-obsessed parents of small children, and indulged ourselves in a night's entertainment at the Rialto, which for one glorious and side-splittingly hilarious evening hosted comedian Jerry Seinfeld for two high-profile performances.

When tickets for Seinfeld's appearance went on sale several weeks ago, the town buzzed with excitement at the prospect of the wise-cracking New Yorker gracing our most fabulous stage. I should know, since I stood in line mighty early to get fourth row tickets for my wife's birthday present.

Such was the overwhelming demand for the show that later that day a second performance was announced -- and its tickets sold like hot cakes, too. On performance night, the Rialto brought well over 3,500 people into downtown Joliet ready to have some laughs and spend money -- a fact to be noted with some measure of respect.

I should elaborate. Random readers from outside the area might harbor the mistaken impression that as the fourth-largest Illinois metropolis, Joliet possesses a vibrant downtown nightlife scene.

Shockingly, though, this is not the case. As we natives well know, about the most glitz and glamour you'll get downtown on non-Rialto performance nights is the flashing blue light emanating in a menacing Big Brother-like fashion from the Homeland Security cameras mounted on buildings throughout the city's central district.

That's why we need people like Seinfeld to come to town occasionally, jazz up the scene, and make us forget temporarily that we live in such a sleepy, quiet, middle of the road, surveillance-camera-infested place. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

But now that the raucous laughter from Seinfeld's routine has died down, we should contemplate something far less funny. With about \$7 million more in reserves within the overall 2012 budget projections than previously estimated during the summer, the City Council still cut \$100,000 of its support for the Rialto and \$166,000 more from other local arts organizations.

Consider that hundreds, if not thousands, of Rialto patrons that night went out to dinner (and/or to the casino) before or after the shows and fed generous wads of their hard-earned money to the local economy. I can testify that we enjoyed a phenomenal meal at a downtown establishment that was absolutely hopping during "wave two" of Rialto-stimulated business.

Consider that instead of mocking our nightlife-challenged burg, Seinfeld took pains to declare sincerely that the Rialto is one of the most beautiful and glorious performance venues he has ever played. (And does anyone seriously think he would come to Joliet were the Rialto not here?)

Finally, consider which is funnier: a Jerry Seinfeld stand-up comedy performance, or the three-ring circus of Joliet's ongoing budget deliberations?

*Mike Bryson (mbry22@sbcglobal.net) urges readers to support the arts venues, restaurants, and local businesses in downtown Joliet, his hometown.*

## **Too Much of a Good Thing at Teale Woods**

15 December 2011

(Published as "'Improvements' Strip Forest of Its Greenery"  
in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p30)

A year and a half ago, I wrote in this column about an obscure tract of urban forest in Joliet called Teale Woods. Heretofore an overgrown and litter-strewn city woodland, the place nevertheless possessed an air of mystery and enchantment.

No doubt my fascination with this humble woodland was partly due to its namesake, Edwin Way Teale, a Joliet native and one of America's foremost nature writers and photographers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I like to think Teale would've found much here to appreciate and value.

He had a knack of seeing wonderful things -- whether a locally rare bird species making its spring migration, or a beautifully-patterned lichen on the rough bark of an oak tree. Such treasures abound if we take the time to notice them, even in ecologically compromised patches of urban nature.

Not long after my March 2010 article appeared, the Will County Forest Preserve District revealed a "Preserve Improvement and Management Plan" to convert Teale Woods into a 15-acre recreational space, and then solicited public input on their ideas. (I was one of seven people to provide comments.) This fall, the Forest Preserve completed \$100,000 worth of work building a 0.3-mile paved trail and clearing a large lawn area at the trailhead.

I should emphasize that I unequivocally support the Forest Preserve's untiring efforts in acquiring open space, providing outdoor recreation opportunities, educating citizens, and restoring native ecosystems. The WCFPD is the driving force for environmental conservation in Will County as well as a major contributor to its citizens' quality of life.

Nevertheless, I feel that the development of Teale Woods has missed the mark.

In place of the narrow footpath that once afforded intimacy with the woods is a winding stretch of 10-foot-wide pavement that resembles a road more than a trail. Such an "improvement" feels like overkill within such a small tract of land, where scale is important and every square yard of green space counts.

Just as disappointing is the unattractive and poorly-placed bench on an incongruous concrete pad near the public access at Theodore and Center Streets. Marooned within an enlarged lawn area that was bulldozed of shrubs and small trees, this uninviting "rest stop" has a decidedly uninspiring view of a garbage can and the blacktopped path.

Teale Woods is still a valuable green space in the heart of Joliet's urban core. But in sacrificing modest and aesthetically-sensitive design for the dubious recreational values of a road-like trail and a turfgrass field, its stewards have compromised the forest's fundamental character.

I'm not exactly sure what Edwin Way Teale would think of the woods and the changes that have occurred these last few months. But I seriously doubt he'd be much impressed.

*Joliet resident Mike Bryson can be reached at [mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net).*