

Citizens of Ogdensburg & North Country Neighbors – Greetings from the City Manager!

I appreciate the opportunity given to me by the Ogdensburg City Council and I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible in the next few months. As we wave goodbye to the incredible summer and greet the crisp days of fall, we know that preparations are already underway for a long winter. What a year 2020 is and it is not over yet.

Since taking responsibility for the city management team in July 2020, much is being said in social media; some true, some not so true and some absolutely false. While not possible for me to address each and every question or concern in a single letter, I want you to hear directly from me and I want to extend an invitation for you to come to city hall or invite me to your business, event, gathering or any location comfortable and secure. I am eager to meet you.

First and most important to many of you, I do have ties, strongly family ties to the City of Ogdensburg. My brother, Jason, and I are the first generation of “Jellie’s” not to grow up in Ogdensburg in many, many years. My father, Richard Jellie, grew up in Ogdensburg as did at least 3 generations of our family before him. Richard met my mother, Victoria, while in the Air Force and they settled in Ogdensburg after his discharge. We moved away when I was just 5 upon my father’s transfer to Black River, NY with then the “St. Lawrence National Bank”. I grew up in Black River, and went to high school in Carthage. If your last name is Jellie, Joly, Sullivan or Cobb, we are most likely related and I look forward to meeting all of you. My biological father, Vincent J. Cavallario Jr, resides in Watertown. Thanks to expanding DNA technology I was reunited with him and my biological mother. Many of you remember my great uncles, Sam and Joe Cavallario, that owned and operated the local hot spot “Oscar’s” for decades. I call it the local hot spot because that is what it is called by Sam’s life partner, Myrna O’Neil. And for the record, I have no known family connection to Mayor Skelly.

I care deeply about the North Country, my roots are here and my wife, Mary, and I chose to raise our family here. In January 2020 we welcomed our first child, Gabriel, to the Adirondacks when he was born in Saranac Lake. For the past two years we operated Mary’s family convenience store “Larkin’s Junction Depot” in Tupper Lake. We hope to give our children the same outdoor adventure lifestyle that we both experienced. It is also our hope that we can instill the same working-class values and principles that our parents gave us.

On to the business of city government. The City of Ogdensburg is in serious financial stress, there is no easy or more transparent way to deliver that news. Revenues are in decline, expenses are rising, critical infra-structure is very old and must be replaced and much of the beautiful waterfront remains contaminated with petroleum, chemicals and heavy metals. We will most likely see a significant drop in population in the 2020 Census, our property tax rates are among the highest in the state and federal aid will be reduced sharply as the nation’s continue to battle COVID-19. That of course, is the bad news.

The people of the City of Ogdensburg are strong, passionate and determined. If I did not already know that, the past 90 days well defined those characteristics in all of you. Your values are squarely aligned with your most important resource – The People. The mighty St. Lawrence River continues to run vigorously between the borders of our great nation and that of our centuries old neighbor, Canada. There is renewed interest in building on the waterfront with business and residential opportunities that will be the catalyst for growth of the Maple City so long sought after. Many of our local entrepreneurs are working diligently to grow their family businesses and reinvest in the city. That is the good news.

In my first 90 days as your interim city manager I forged immediate positive relationships with the SLC County Administrator and staff, the Ogdensburg School Superintendent, the Executive Director and Chairman of the OBPA, the Executive Director and Chairman of the Remington Museum, County Legislator James Reagan, Senator Ritchie's Staff, Assemblyman Walczyk's staff, the Mayor of Heuvelton, the Executive Director of DANC and his staff, and the 4 key media outlets. There are many more I could add and many more to come. The staff at City Hall and I are in the beginning of a solid foundation to rebuild city government that will stand the test of the challenges presented for the next 50 years, however, there is much more I need to do to build the trust and confidence of all city staff.

Drastic action today is the only opportunity I see for improving tomorrow. And, when I say action, I mean well thought out, carefully planned, decisive action that is transparent for all. There can be no secrets between local government and the citizens or the distrust and skepticism will continue. I do not seek to silence anyone, especially our employee unions. Official city business will be communicated often, accurately and directly by the right person with the right message. Every resident and employee of this city and every leader of this community must accept, embrace and embody the notion that city government cannot and will not look the same in the coming years; we can no longer afford it. We need our highly valued city employees more than ever and we will do everything possible to retain as many of them as possible, but without serious collective efforts to reduce, restructure and reinvent we will be left with few choices to maintain a balanced budget. Every personnel change impacts a person and a family, a fact we must remember.

We are all on the same team, and we are all allowed to have opinions, beliefs and passions without fear of retaliation or reprisal; we must do our best to respect one another even if we disagree on one or every topic. Elimination of personal attacks, rhetoric filled arguments, sarcastic gestures and name calling must stop now. I ask each of you to please, reassess your current thinking, ask questions often and treat everyone as you want to be treated.

Working together I am confident we can return the City of Ogdensburg to the proud gem of St. Lawrence County and the North Country it once was if we are willing to fully champion breaking of past norms and rapid movement of bold actions.

Thank you,
Stephen Jellie
City Manager, City of Ogdensburg