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Public Utilities Director Retires After 35 Years of Service

Robert Pearson retired as the Public Utilities Director for the City of Lincolnton on the last day of 2022. His accomplishments and contributions during his 34 years of service to the city and its citizens are substantial and he guided his departments through enormous changes in technology, service standards, and industry regulations. He managed the city's water services, including fresh water supply, distribution & collection (the pipes), and wastewater treatment (sewer services) for many years before adding responsibility for electric utilities in 2020. Lincolnton will definitely miss Pearson who became known over the years as the city's "MacGyver" for his unconventional problem solving and extensive scientific knowledge.

Pearson started with the city in 1988, recently out of high school and looking for his purpose, when he accepted a position as a night shift operator at the Water Treatment Plant. He admits he was terrified of the responsibility but found himself addicted within four hours. "I found myself in an environment that was constantly changing; a living, breathing thing that presented continuous challenges." He had two weeks of training and learned the rest on the job. Today, the state requires 6 months of training and apprenticeship for new employees.

His love of learning and "getting his hands on it" have served him well. During his tenure, Pearson rose through the ranks to become the dayshift operator, assistant maintenance & centrifuge operator, laboratory technician, ORC (operator responsibly charged), water resources director, and finally public utilities director. Along the way, he trained numerous city employees who subsequently moved into leadership positions in his and other departments, one of the accomplishments he is most proud of.

Pearson's management style is best summed up when he says, "it's not about me, it's about we," as he deflects compliments and kudos for his contributions. He leads by example and it's evident that his staff of 35+ values his leadership and sense of teamwork. Once, while a repair was in progress, it was time to reconnect the hardware. Without a second thought, Pearson jumped into the trench and began tightening bolts. As staff looked on, several started to tease him about literally jumping into the trenches with his team. His response was simply, "I was just tightening bolts."

When the main wastewater lift station at Betty G Ross Park failed after flooding in 2013, it cost the city about \$200,000 in repairs. When the same lift station failed again during flooding in 2020, Pearson's comments were that we "can never let this happen again". Although it cost more at \$320,000, his recommendation was to harden the lift station installation to be flood proof and avoid making the same repairs repeatedly after inevitable flooding.

Pearson was instrumental in developing and implementing the city's SCADA system (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition), which is basically the hardware and software that enables automated readings and processes in the city's sewer collections and lift station systems. The complex and complicated process of recording chemical and flow readings, and monitoring pumps, valves, and motors was a completely manual process until SCADA technology was deployed. Robert's efforts to improve system capabilities with technology have enabled the department to be much more proactive and less reactive, leading to less system downtime and fewer crises or emergency repairs.

Pearson was one of the leads for the city's "smart meter program" in 2018 installing new water meters throughout the system to accurately measure, record, and transmit water consumption virtually in real-time. This technology advancement has recovered thousands of gallons of previously unbilled usage and provides end-users with early warnings for water leaks or other system issues.

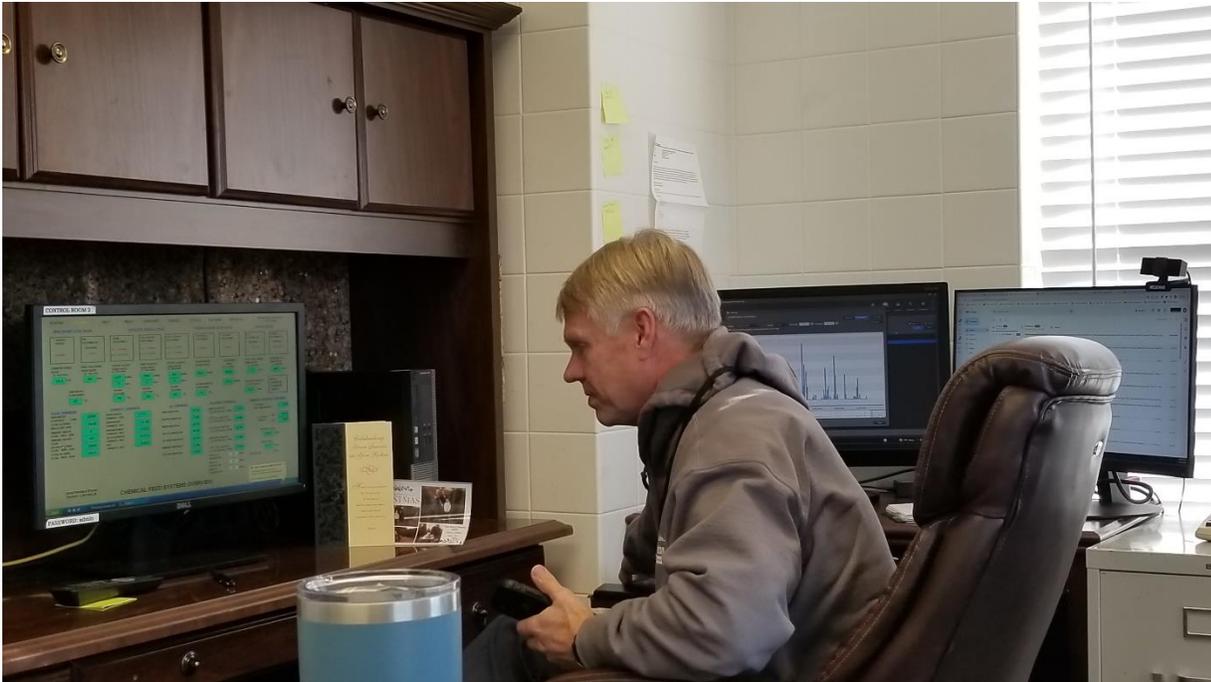
Most recently, Pearson led the city's efforts to digitally map the water and electrical infrastructure system throughout the city service area. After significant research, he recommended acquiring the **iamGIS** software system and spent his last months on the job diligently mapping every water line, sewer line, and electric line in the city. This game-changing approach to infrastructure management coupled with the new smart meters delivers vastly improved services for maintenance and repairs as each connection is cataloged and updated over time.

Pearson originally intended to pursue a mechanical drafting career but decided that AutoCAD and a focus on computer work wouldn't be something he would excel at. Ironically, his career contributions moved the city's utility infrastructure forward with transformative computer technology that wasn't even dreamed of in the 90s and he has certainly put it to work for the city. On a recent visit to his office, Pearson sat at his desk surrounded by computer monitors tracking various systems as he helped a resident identify whether they had a water leak. His excitement about being able to see water usage over the past three months and pinpoint exactly when leaks were occurring clearly demonstrated his love for his work. That pride was also evident as he shared photo albums chronicling the water resources and utilities departments over the years.

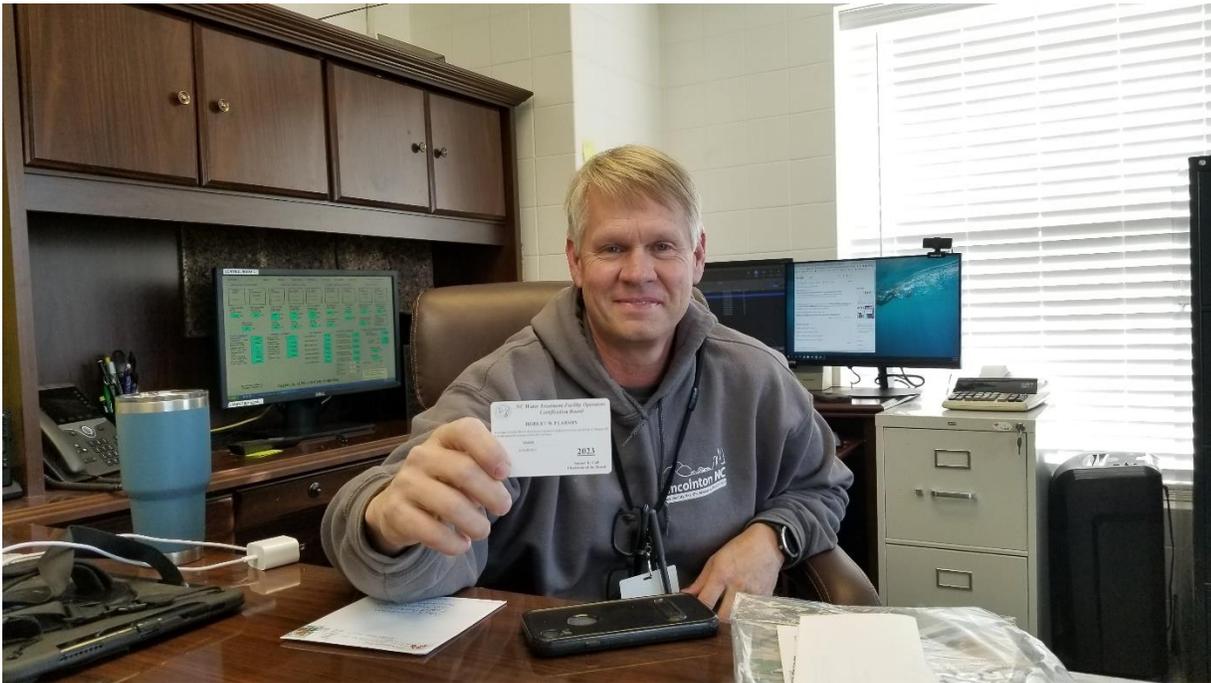
A search for Robert Pearson's replacement as the Public Utilities Director for the City of Lincolnton is underway. "Robert has been a big part of upgrading and improving our city infrastructure and leading our crews into the technology age. Although he will be hard to replace, he leaves the department in a great position to attract a new, first-class leader for our public utility services," said City Manager Ritchie Haynes. He continued, "I want to thank Robert for his years of service and wish him the very best in his retirement," he concluded.

The City of Lincolnton staff will miss our in-house MacGyver and Pearson's positive "we can fix that" attitude, but we also know his family is thrilled to have him home full-time.

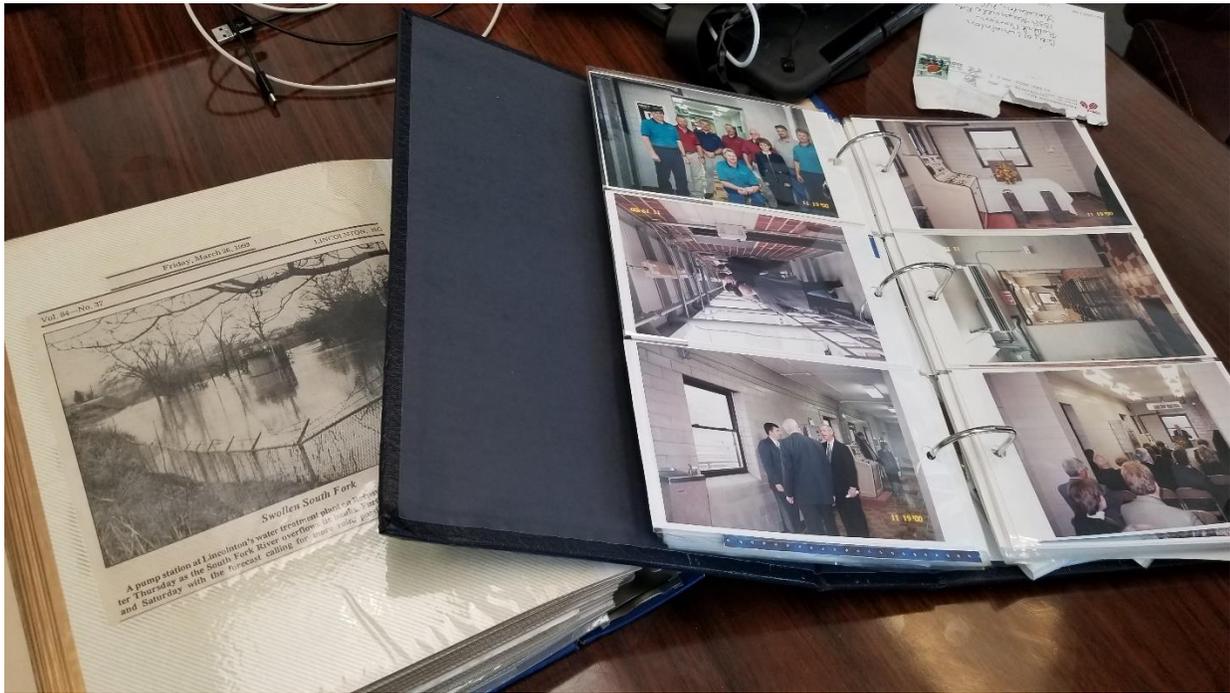
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Robert Pearson at his desk on 12/21/22 helping a city water customer identify a leak.



Pearson's 2023 certification and renewal license arrived just days before his departure.



Lincolnton Water Resources scrapbooks, a source of department pride, with Pearson in the top center.



Aerial views from 2010.