Reflections on two cities which share a school district by Mayor Thomas P. Schneider in December 2014, borrowing from “A Tale of Two Cities” by Charles Dickens, published in a series from April to November 1859. And whilst with our famous author might we visit his Spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future.

“I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year.”

Charles Dickens
1812 - 1870

On behalf of the City Council, Judge Boyle, our dedicated employees and the citizens of Florissant I would like to say that our thoughts and prayers have been with the cities of Ferguson and Dellwood and with those who are working to rebuild damaged property and lives and to find remedies to heal our region and nation. I would also like to publicly thank Chief Timothy Lowery, his command staff, officers and support staff for their professionalism, sacrifice, dedication and devotion to duty. They answered the call for assistance repeatedly and also gave up their Thanksgiving so that the rest of us could enjoy a peaceful holiday with our families. They are “on call to protect us always.”

The Chief and I have made a conscious effort to respect the seriousness of these times and the feelings of all stakeholders. We have attended numerous meetings with clergy, elected and appointed officials, social advisors, law enforcement leaders and many others. The Chief and I are in frequent contact to discuss contingencies. With the media we have been cautious and have made a deliberate decision to be men of few words.

Less than a week before the incident that has pre-occupied the metropolitan area, the nation and the world, the tax levy that the Ferguson-Florissant School District needed to survive and serve the children of our area, including Ferguson, was passed on Tuesday, August 5th. I asked prominent Florissant businessman Johnny Londoff Jr to join me to educate the public on the importance of the funds to the district. We celebrated the victory with Ferguson-Florissant District officials. Our joy and optimism for the district and the communities it serves were high and, in the words of Charles Dickens, “it was the best of times”.
Our celebration was short-lived. The events that unfolded after the following weekend have shocked and challenged us and some moments it felt like “it was the worst of times”, especially just south of our city.

To illustrate that we are sensitive to the importance of the discussions taking place about justice, education, fairness and opportunity, I would like to borrow some thoughts that Dickens published 155 years ago about an era that started 225 years ago last July 14th, which was very likely on the minds of the French citizens of the infant village of San Fernando de Fleurissant.

“A Tale of Two Cities” by Charles Dickens (himself a victim of social injustice as a child) is an essential literary work that reflects on the cities of Paris and London during the anarchy of the French Revolution. It was published in a series and read by hundreds of thousands of avid readers 155 years ago, from April to November 1859 (only two years after the 1857 St. Ferdinand City Charter) The narrative opens and closes with poignant thoughts that have become legendary in English literature, thoughts that were written for the ages, thoughts that were written for times like these.

Chapter one opens with:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way – “

Later in the book Dickens describes a vision we can adopt to express our hopes and prayers for the outcome we sincerely want for our sister cities and for our regional family:

“I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and their struggles to be truly free in their triumphs and defeats,”

The final page closes with the last words of a man who considered his life a failure, who secretly traded places with an unconscious condemned man who had everything to live for, thereby condemning his own mortal body to the guillotine but redeeming his eternal soul for salvation.

Reflecting on those who are sincerely working tirelessly in peaceful ways to sacrifice their own comfortable lives to make a positive difference, who are trading places, they truly deserve the right to say to themselves these closing lines to the novel:

“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done;”

And after these noble citizens pitch in for hours and days, weeks and months painting, cleaning, raising relief money, working tirelessly on committees, enduring hostile meetings and doing whatever they can do to rebuild a city or bridge a divide, may they be rewarded for their toil. May they have the sober satisfaction of helping others without seeking recognition. May they be blessed with redemption and be able to whisper Dickens’ last words of his novel to themselves faintly before drifting off to a healing sleep:

“It is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

But rather than end this reflection thus tis the season for a carol.

Charles Dickens wrote another, even more well-known and lasting literary masterpiece that profoundly pulls on our humanitarian heart strings every year. “A Christmas Carol” was published just days before the Christmas of 1843 to illustrate the plight of the impoverished in an age of indifference to human suffering, particularly that of children. (The play was recently performed at the Fox Theater)

Year after year in one adaptation after another on stage or screen we are drawn into each stave or verse to allow the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future to impart their wisdom on us.
Dickens’ Spirit of Christmas Past touches our gentler and tender side by reminding us of our own childhood, when we believed in peace on earth and good will toward all without hesitation.

His Spirit of Christmas Present allows us to see an ailing but loving Tiny Tim and understands the goodness of those we do not know and to be aware of the perils of allowing ignorance and want to exist in a community. He tells Scrooge to beware the former above all.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is the most frightening of all and shows the consequences that a hateful and selfish life will have on our most important earthy possession, our reputation.

Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning a changed man, with joy and love in his heart, spends the day with family and anonymously sends a turkey to Bob Cratchit’s home. Later he gives Cratchit a raise and becomes like “a second father” to Tiny Tim and treats everyone with kindness, generosity and compassion. Scrooge now had the good reputation of having a sense of humor and “it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well.” The story closes with Tiny Tim’s famous words:

“God bless us, everyone!”