

Michael Lorentz, the mayor of Belpre, describes the city as a small, welcoming community. And despite being small, it's thriving.

In the 13 years since Lorentz became mayor, he's seen many new businesses move into Belpre, everything from health care to Taco Bell and other restaurants to a new coffee shop coming in the spring.

"We're better off now than we were 10, 12 years ago," he said.

Lorentz has lived in Belpre for most of his life. He raised his children there and wanted to create a place that was good enough for them to stay, he said.

"Someone with kids would be pleased to say, 'Hey this might be the place for us,'" Lorentz said.

Lorentz's journey to becoming mayor started with his kids. When his children were in high school band, Lorentz and his wife joined the band boosters. When he made a suggestion for the band to travel less to save money because of financial troubles, a school board member told him he could "put up or shut up."

"So I went home, called my boss and said 'I'll be a little bit late in the morning.' I went to Marietta and turned in my petition for the school board," Lorentz said. He was on the school board for 14 years.

He retired from his job in 2006 and ended up running for city council president. He went to a Mayors' Partnership for Progress meeting, and the then-current mayor, who was planning on stepping down from the post, introduced Lorentz as the next mayor of Belpre.

"I said 'You have got to be crazy, I won't do that,'" Lorentz said. But, after talking with his wife, he decided he would run.

As mayor, Lorentz saw the Marietta Memorial Hospital move into the region and become the largest employer in Belpre. The town's other large employer, Kraton, a biochemical polymer factory, also employs a great number of people, including Lorentz before he retired.

During the pandemic, new businesses did continue to open. But one of the biggest struggles Belpre is facing is how much of a deterrent the pandemic has been to many individuals working, because some don't want to work and others aren't able to, Lorentz said.

The Mayors' Partnership for Progress, supported by Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, has been a help for Lorentz during the pandemic and before it, he said. With large amounts of money coming in from the federal and state governments, Lorentz has been able to work with others to determine the best ways to use the money. It was

a transition for him coming from industry to the government sector with constraints on how to use budgeted money, he said.

“It’s (The Mayors’ Partnership for Progress) been a blessing,” Lorentz said. “No matter what your background, once you take a job like this, trust me, you don’t know it all.”

Lorentz said retirement from government service is on the horizon for him, even though he’s enjoyed being mayor and will miss it.

“I hope to leave (Belpre) in a better place than I found it,” he said.