MARILYN LOUISE HARDACRE
by Kim Baltus, M. Kathy Woitynek,
Thom Gerretsen and MACCI.

When Marilyn Hardacre became mayor in 1978, Palmetto Avenue next to Marshfield High School was a gravel road – and it wasn't the only one.

Smaller percentages of city streets had concrete, curbs, gutters, terrace trees and sidewalks. Many neighborhood streets couldn't stay smooth, as cold-rolled paving material quickly made them bumpier than today's hot asphalt. And the nearest four-lane highway was 30 miles away, making the drive from Marshfield to Stevens Point at least 15 minutes longer than it is now.

Transportation was far from the only hurdle facing Marshfield's first female mayor, but Hardacre (1935-2019) knew that her dreams for this city hinged on building better roads. Her agenda was expansive: improving the business climate; maintaining a healthy downtown; meeting housing needs; enhancing growth of the medical complex; more functional operations in a new City Hall; and more.

Through eight years as mayor and 11 more heading the Marshfield Area Chamber of Commerce & Industry (MACCI), Hardacre's hallmark was fostering modern roads that made it easier for residents to live here and businesses to thrive here. She secured millions of dollars of road funding and related investments. They still benefit all who step foot here.

Marshfield's 150 are not ranked. If they were, it would seem ludicrous not to place Marilyn near the top. For that we can thank Marshfield Clinic, which recruited surgeon Jerry Hardacre from Ohio in 1966. Soon after moving to Wisconsin his bride joined the St. Joseph's Hospital Auxiliary, rising to its presidency.

In 1971, then-Mayor Ray Tippelt named her to the city's Recreation Committee. Four years later, Hardacre became the first woman in a half-century to be elected to a Common Council seat, representing the 4th Ward. She ran for mayor in 1978 as "Tip" was about to retire. Her family says Marilyn knocked on every door in Marshfield in her initial campaign. A legion of volunteers helped her win the first of her four terms.

Hardacre's plan to improve streets had the city borrowing millions and having adjacent landowners pay special assessments -- not always well-received. One homeowner said he'd rather keep his "ditches and potholes" instead of a flat sidewalk and terrace next to his new pavement. Other critics said the interest from the borrowing would drown



Marilyn Hardacre

the city's coffers. No way. Once the cold-roll disappeared, folks appreciated smoother travels. "Curb-&-gutter streets" became annual rituals. Later, the city adopted five-year street plans, updated annually.

When the road plan was set, Hardacre could tend to the rest of her agenda. However, a debate raged over whether a Highway 13 bypass should go either east or west of town. With a threat of losing state project funds, the mayor sought a crosstown four-lane expressway. Her efforts, amid criticism that the compromise might "split the city in two," continued through her tenure as MACCI's chief executive. Finally in 2003, Veterans Parkway opened. In 2012, it was connected to a new four-lane Highway 10 from Marshfield to Appleton with direct expressway access to Madison and Milwaukee.

It wasn't all about work. Hardacre also made sure the community could celebrate after she, mobile home magnate Elmer Frey, and WDLB farm broadcaster Les Leonard teamed up to create Marshfield's June Dairyfest in the early 1980s.

In her MACCI years, Hardacre looked to the future by starting the region's first program to cultivate leaders in all aspects of the community. Leadership Marshfield graduated its 30th annual class in 2022, creating new energetic leaders and at least one industry hall-of-famer. Hardacre long set her own leadership example, serving on numerous local and state panels and was the first female president of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities. After leaving MACCI, she remained devoted to a host of causes. Most prominently, she led a community

fund drive for the American Cancer Society's former Hope Lodge, and was president of the board that opened the Marshfield Area YMCA.

The headline of a 2019 Hub City Times remembrance mentioned Hardacre's "Big Heart, Big Dreams, Big Accomplishments." She displayed all three in droves to virtually everyone who conversed with her.

Marilyn Hardacre won't soon be forgotten: Still, her "forever profile" could have been much higher. She rejected a proposal from former Alderman Don Nystrom to name Veterans Parkway in her honor. She did accept more modest recognition when the tiny one-block Quentin Avenue where she lived was renamed Hardacre Avenue. Also, movie theater owner Paul Rogers built the colorful Hardacre Park in 2015 at 5th-and-Central – an artful reflection of Marilyn's and Marshfield's past and present.