

Ironton Mayor Samuel Cramblit describes his hometown as a historic, industrial river town with deep roots and some homes that were part of the Underground Railroad because of the municipality's proximity to the Ohio River and Kentucky.

The town also used to be one of the world's largest producers of pig iron, Cramblit said.

"In our historic days, we were a blooming city. We also were part of the DTI (Detroit, Toledo and Ironton) Railroad system," he said. "Now in modern days, we are in what I would call a renaissance area where things are starting to come back to life."

Cramblit's goal for Ironton now is to improve the quality of life for its citizens, giving people more opportunities in the city and creating a place where people can raise their families.

He also hopes to shift Ironton's focus toward traveling tourism. The city has a riverfront, land at the edge of the county that could be used for recreational opportunities and trails in the Wayne National Forest.

"There's a lot to offer here, but it's never been tapped into, so knowing that's where we're going, it's really nice to know," Cramblit said. "Maybe a family that can't get a cabin at Hocking Hills one weekend will say, 'Well, let's go to Ironton.'"

Cramblit took office Dec. 1, 2019. He had about three months of a normal tenure before the coronavirus pandemic hit.

Despite the pandemic, Cramblit said Ironton has still seen a lot of business growth, in part thanks to federal government assistance programs. And throughout the pandemic, Cramblit said he and his office did not stop working toward pre-pandemic goals.

"If we quit now, it was all for nothing. It's like playing a football game and only playing three quarters or a half and then just saying 'we quit' while we were ahead and lose the rest of the game," he said. "That's not my mentality. I like to see things finished."

The hardest part of the pandemic, Cramblit said, has been navigating the community divisions regarding the pandemic, and the biggest challenge leaders face is not knowing how long the pandemic, and pandemic-related divisions, will continue.

Throughout the pandemic, the Mayors' Partnership for Progress, which is supported by the Voinovich School of Leadership at Public Service at Ohio University, helped Cramblit and Ironton talk with other mayors who were experiencing the same struggles.

"As a collective, it's very helpful to bounce those thoughts, concerns and issues off of each other to work through them together," he said. "I'm grateful for being a part of the Mayors' Partnership and what it provides for the citizens of Ironton and the citizens of Appalachia Ohio."

Cramblit is a young mayor. He graduated from Ohio University in 2015 and worked as a campaign consultant and manager, traveling around the country and seeing different cities and governments.

“Every time I saw something, I thought that would be great in Ironton,” he said.

Between campaign seasons, Cramblit would attend council meetings back in his hometown. He said he noticed that Ironton City Council had generally a negative tone when discussing the city.

“I heard a lot of discouraging narratives,” he said. “You should have optimistic leaders who are looking to move the community forward.”

Cramblit said he felt a calling to run for the position of mayor.

“I felt like I had accomplished a lot of great things for communities running the elections and issues we pushed around the country, and it was like, ‘I want to do this for the people I know and the people that I loved,’” he said.

Despite the challenges Cramblit has faced in his position, he said he believes that the future for Ironton is bright.

“In a dark time, where we’re dealing with a lot of issues through this pandemic, there are a lot of good things happening for our future,” he said.