

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT
April/May/June - 2004

JANICE RETTMAN
County Commissioner
District 3

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Dear District 3 Resident:

I hope this letter provides you with information on some of the issues being discussed by the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners. The views expressed in this newsletter are mine and/or my staff's and are provided to citizens as a part of my responsibility to keep you informed on what I am doing as your County Commissioner. If I, or my staff, can be of assistance to you please call us at **266-8360** or send an e-mail to janice.rettman@co.ramsey.mn.us.

Sincerely, **Janice**

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[Saint Paul Continues Neighborhood Sweep Clean-up Efforts](#)

Sweeps Week takes on a different meaning in Saint Paul neighborhoods as the Division of Property Code Enforcement begins its second summer of focused housing code enforcement. Last year inspection officers performed 14 neighborhood sweeps and hope to do 20 in 2004. Each sweep covers about 28 city blocks.

As with most St. Paul district councils, the District 5 Community Council has been working with the city to get owners to maintain their property at an acceptable standard to the benefit of the entire neighborhood. A recent sweep in their Eastside neighborhood resulted in orders issued to correct 173 code violations. While significant, the number of orders is

not far off from other parts of the city. Violations may include minor offenses such as storing firewood improperly but could also be for major violations such as leaking roofs, peeling lead paint or dilapidated garages.

The sweep efforts are part education and part enforcement as neighborhoods try to encourage property owners to maintain their properties. Owners who have been notified of a code violation have 30 to 60 days to make necessary repairs or 10 days to cleanup unsightly messes. While there is an appeal process for owners to explain extenuating circumstances and seek additional time, the goal is to get the problem resolved. In addition to serious penalties, those who do not comply may also be charged fees for "excessive consumption" of city services.

While on the Saint Paul City Council, Janice Rettman introduced the first sweep concept with the assistance of code enforcement staff and co-authored with Councilmember Bill Wilson both the excessive consumption of enforcement services ordinance and the first Neighborhood Nuisance Handbook at her own expense.

For information on neighborhood sweeps or to file a housing code complaint, contact the city of Saint Paul at 266-1900 or use the Neighborhood Housing and Property Improvement section on the city's webpage at www.ci.stpaul.mn.us.

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Tree/Shrub Waste Collection Program

Judging from the amount of tree and shrub waste collected in the first weeks of the program it could be called a major success – and without any advertising. To keep up with early demand, the County has had to chip and remove the wood from the collection sites on a weekly basis.

The collection program also provided an unforeseen benefit when a severe storm passed through the Como Park area of Saint Paul in early May leaving dozens of fallen trees and broken branches in its wake. While the city removed trees from the park and boulevards, homeowners were responsible for trees on their own property. Those with chain saws were able to dispose of the branches quickly and with a limited amount of work. Because of the size of the equipment used to handle and chip branches at the compost site, they only need to be cut into a size that can be transported by homeowners.

Whether it is people cleaning up after a storm or folks just trimming and cleaning up their property, the means of transporting wood waste

has been an experience in creativity. It has appeared at the sites cut in every size and delivered in everything from small car trunks with paper grocery bags to pick-up trucks, borrowed dump trucks and even a boat or two.

Commissioner Janice Rettman, who developed the program, stated that "A number of citizens have called, emailed or stopped me at events and expressed their appreciation for adding woody waste to the compost collection. It has been an unbelievable win-win effort initiated by my constituents."

The 4 compost sites accepting wood waste, (Arden Hills, White Bear Township, Midway and Franks/Sims) are open Saturday 9-5, Sunday 11-5, and Monday, Wednesday, Friday from 11-7. All sites are closed Tuesdays & Thursdays.

Residents are reminded that you must be a Ramsey County resident with an I.D. in order to take advantage of the program. Commercial and industrial entities are not permitted so if you borrow a truck from your friend's tree trimming service you will likely be turned away.

Finally, if you have cable television, you can see where the majority of wood waste delivered to the compost sites is going. Check your local listings for times for the *Ramsey Talks* segments on the local government channel during mid-July and mid-August.

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800 Megahertz Chugs Along

Ramsey County's effort to upgrade the police and fire communications systems continues to move forward albeit at a snail's pace. The 800 megahertz radio system allows a multitude of departments to talk to each other directly on the same radio frequency regardless of where an incident occurs, rather than having to work through dispatchers or a patchwork connection.

The total cost of the project has risen significantly (from \$32 million to \$41.7 million) since it was first brought before the Board and questions remain about who will actually pay for the system. It is hoped that major federal grants will become available in the near future but there is no assurance that such funds would be forthcoming. Some state funding may be available in the future but the legislature's inability to compromise in the last session has made that source also questionable. Without clearly identified sources of revenue the project might not proceed or the cost would fall on local property taxes.

Commissioner Janice Rettman, who represents portions of Saint Paul and the city of Falcon Heights, has been supportive of the safety effort but remains concerned about the cost and the ability to proportion both the construction cost and the annual operating expenses fairly. "All along I have said I would support building the backbone for the various cities to hook into but I can't support a county tax to both build and then operate the system."

The Board itself has committed to building the backbone of the system and assisting in the cost of radios and training. To date they have received \$15.1 million in grants and issued \$14.7 million in bonds. It is unclear at this time how the bonds will be paid off but call-based fees or annual charges to users have been discussed as possible options.

The stumbling block at this point is how many communication centers will be built to serve County residents. Currently Saint Paul, White Bear Lake and Maplewood each have their own communication centers while the 16 remaining municipalities contract to use the Sheriff's network for their dispatch services or contract with the Sheriff for dispatch and patrol services. In addition, the sheriff's dispatch center is used to support the water patrol and deputies' work on behalf of the court system.

Saint Paul has already agreed to construct the CAD (computer aided dispatch) system that provides information about individuals or properties to police officers on a scene using a \$3.2 million federal Homeland Security grant. Currently, all cities use that system as a resource and would continue to do so under a new working agreement.

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Board Discusses Nursing Home Status

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners recently began discussions about the future of the Ramsey County Nursing Home. While it is a respected care facility, it suffers from the same problems as other nursing homes in the state, that is, rising operating costs, demand for more services and lower re-imbursements from the state and health insurance providers.

Completed in 1980, the Nursing Home has 180 beds with 24-hour skilled nursing care for short-term and long-term patients. Its history dates back to 1885 when it was part of the County's working "poor farm" that was located on the current White Bear Avenue site.

In a related matter, a state judge recently ruled that nursing home employees must continue to be paid a \$1.10 per hour raise that the state legislature approved in 2003 but stopped funding last year when legislators tried to address the state's budget problems. It becomes an issue because the nursing home is already operating at a loss and the requirement, in effect, becomes another unfunded state mandate.

Commissioner Janice Rettman has made it clear that her goal is to keep the nursing home open and operating for many years to come. Following the Board's discussion, she said that "I appreciate the policy questions about whether this is a service the County should provide and who should pay for it. But if we decide we shouldn't put the shortfall on the property tax base we need to explore every option to make this a viable program. I think the solution is not on our screen yet."

The Board did establish a task force to look at options for the facility that could include changes in current operations or adding new private-pay services such as assisted living units or a center for people who have developed dementia or Alzheimer's Disease. The task force, which includes staff, citizens, financial professionals and health care professionals, will report back to the Board in early December.

"This is a wonderful facility and I am proud of the dedicated staff and the quality of the work they do. I am willing to work on any idea that assures continuous operation because the demand for these services is going to increase, not decrease. Some of our family members, our friends and our neighbors are going to need this as baby boomers get older so we need to be prepared for that scenario."

Information on the history of the Ramsey County Nursing Home or the services it provides is available on the County's website at www.co.ramsey.mn.us.

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Personal Information At Issue

At a recent meeting the County Board held a lengthy discussion on how to protect personal information from finding its way into the public access area of the tax records system. The major issue was social security numbers appearing on mortgage documents submitted by finance and title companies. County staff said that it might be difficult or time consuming to sort through documents and they were concerned that the law might not allow them to block out information.

Some Board members were surprised by the accessibility problem but Commissioner Janice Rettman responded that "I have raised this issue before and will continue to do so. I think citizens have a right to expect government to do its job in protecting private information even if it takes some extraordinary measures."

County staff will report back later this year with some possible solutions that could include computer software that recognizes specific information and automatically blocks it out.

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Ramsey County Parks Office Summer Programs

"I'm bored and there is nothing to do!" How often do parents hear comments like that during summer vacation. Even as adults we look for a change of pace – something new and different to do. Ramsey County offers many opportunities for both children and adults through its parks and recreation system. In addition to its 5 golf courses, the County is blessed with several lakes where it operates 9 outdoor beaches free of charge. The beaches are open from 12:00 noon until 8:00 P.M. from June 12th until August 15th with lifeguards on duty.

The Battle Creek Waterpark is an outdoor facility that has a variety of waterslides and play structures for children of all ages. The fee is \$5.00 per person (child or adult) or \$3.50 after 5:00 p.m. Groups over 25 people can get a 10% discount with advance notice.

Picnic facilities are available at all of the County's 14 parks. Reservations can be made for exclusive use of the shelters or enclosed pavilions on a first-come, first-served basis.

Dogs can have their own fun running free at any of the 3 dog parks operated by the County or they may accompany you on the trail system as long as they are on a leash. But please pick up after them and make sure you bring an adequate supply of water - for both you and your dog.

For bicycle enthusiasts, 3.3 miles of mixed-use trails and 4.5 miles of single-lane mountain biking trails are available at the Battle Creek Regional Park to challenge you in addition to many other bike trails in the east metro area.

For boaters and fishing enthusiasts there are 13 lakes with public boat access and 5 more have foot access for fishing, including piers that accessible for the handicapped. Parking spaces are limited and some lake restrictions may be in place such as speed and motor size.

For walkers and hikers there are some 30 miles of trails within our parks or that connect to the regional trail system.

Your favorite Robin Hood has two archery ranges available (Arden Hills and Maplewood) with shooting lanes up to 40 yards while horseshoe throwers can find 15 courts available at the White Bear Avenue facility located at 2030 White Bear Avenue.

Finally, volunteers are always needed to help clean up the parks, provide support for special events, planting gardens or to use special skills such as bird identification for surveys or to assist in land management. This can be an educational experience for children and young adults, a social event or a community building activity, as well as achieving a sense of accomplishment.

For information on these and other activities check the Parks and Recreation section of the County's webpage (www.co.ramsey.mn.us) or call 651-748-2500.

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House For Sale

Are you a person who is handy with tools and looking for a new home? On September 22 Ramsey County will be auctioning off a number of tax-forfeited properties including a single-family home at 783 Como Avenue, just ½ mile from Como Park. If you are not so handy, purchase prices usually are low enough that qualified contractors can be hired to do the work and you will still end up with an updated family home well within the range of its market value.

This is a live auction with a minimum bid and the property going to the highest bidder. All properties are sold "as is" and they will be open for inspection before the auction. For

further information check the Tax Forfeited Land section of the Ramsey County webpage at www.co.ramsey.mn.us or call 651-266-2080.

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Volunteer Opportunities

In addition to a wide variety of volunteer opportunities in its departments, Ramsey County is always looking for individuals to serve on its many advisory committees. Whether your interest is in capitol improvements like roads, bridges and buildings, parks and recreation or human services your expertise is valuable to the County Board in its decision-making process.

For info call the County Manager's Office (651-266-8000) or check the volunteer opportunities site under the *Elected Officials* section of the county webpage at www.co.ramsey.mn.us.

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