

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT

Winter – 2005/2006

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.

County Board Adopts 2-year Budget – Sets levy for 2006

On December 20th the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners adopted the 2006 and 2007 budgets. County spending will be about \$519 million in 2006 and \$527 million in 2007. The property tax levy for 2006 will generate a total of \$212,695,461 covering 42.3% of the budget with the remainder paid by the federal and state governments, private grants and a variety of fees. The 2007 levy, estimated at 223,397,820, will be set in December of 2006 after the total estimated revenue for 2007 has been determined.

In an effort to streamline the budget process the Ramsey County Board adopted a two-year budget cycle earlier in 2005. Under the two-year process the spending plan will be reviewed in-depth in odd-numbered years with a limited review in even-numbered years to allow for adjustments made necessary by changes in income from other agencies, new mandates or changes in county policies or services. While it is thought by some that the 2-year process will allow for better long-range planning,

Commissioner Janice Rettman has consistently opposed the 2-year cycle because she believes that it does not allow the scrutiny and public involvement local government spending demands.

The Commissioner believes that a 2-year budget planning cycle can be used in conjunction with an annual budget review. "I think that the two-year budget leaves the citizens out of the process and limits the Board's scrutiny. Our income from the state and federal governments can change dramatically every year because they set many of our priorities and provide some, but not always all, of the funding. We have seen in the past that the legislature can be quick to tell us what we need to do but do not commit the dollars to match that mandate. The result is a rise in property taxes if we don't make matching cuts."

"I am committed to making sure that all Ramsey County citizens are getting the best services for their tax dollars and to controlling spending. But I am concerned that the Board can't do this effectively every two years when priorities change every year and sometimes with limited notice."

The County Board must still approve the property tax levy annually and hold the Joint Truth-In-Taxation hearing that gives citizens an opportunity to speak directly to elected officials about their concerns or support.

About 25% of the property taxes paid by Ramsey County citizens goes to the county with most of the remainder going to cities and school districts. To help citizens understand property taxes Commissioner Janice Rettman has a printable information sheet available on her page of the county's website (www.co.ramsey.mn.us)

Tax Breaks Worth Reviewing

Because the state legislature controls a great deal of how much property tax you may pay, the pain of increased taxes can sometimes be offset by state tax refund programs. These refunds are offered by in two ways. Under the first set of rules, often called the "circuit breaker", refunds are provided on a sliding scale based on income, age and family circumstances. It is open to all homeowners with incomes under \$85,210 and renters with incomes less than \$45,970. The maximum refund is \$1,640.

Under the second "special refund program" homeowners whose property taxes increased by at least 12% and at least \$100 can receive a refund equal to 60 per cent of the increase above 12% up to a maximum of \$1000. There are no income limitations for the special refund and some homeowners may receive a refund under both plans.

Our experts in the county taxation division estimate that a majority of Ramsey County homeowners will qualify for the special refund this year even though many not have qualified in the past, so it is important to take a few minutes to fill out Minnesota form M1PR. The form must be sent in by August 15 to get a refund but if you file by August 1 you can receive your refund in time to pay your second-half taxes (due by October 15th). If you did not receive a tax booklet in the mail, you can pick one up at various tax form outlets or download one from the property tax section of the state website at www.taxes.state.mn.us.

And what do these tax breaks cost the state? Since 2003, the total amount for all checks issued under the circuit breaker plan rose from

\$86.9 million to \$147 million. For the special refund the amount rose from \$700,000 to \$7.3 million, a ten-fold increase. These numbers are expected to rise further for refunds issued in 2006.

Finally, if you have questions or doubt the appraised value of your property you can meet face-to-face with a county assessor at the open book meetings each spring. This year they will be held on March 27 and 28 for St. Paul property owners and March 29 and 30 for suburban properties (all meetings are at the Roseville Skating Center at County Road C and Lexington). Bring any information that will support your case or clarify the assessor's file for accuracy (i.e. do they indicate you have 3 bathrooms when there are only 2). You can also appeal to the Board of Equalization, so check the County Assessor's page on the Ramsey County website or call 266-2131 for more information.

Truth in Taxation Hearing Draws a Crowd

Over 200 Saint Paul residents joined their local elected officials on December 12th to support, question, complain or vent their opinions on the proposed tax levies for the city of St. Paul, the St. Paul School District, Ramsey County and the Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority. Required by state law, the annual truth-in-taxation hearing can vary in attendance from one year to the next, usually depending on the amount of increase in taxes property owners will be expected to pay the following year.

Fifty residents rose to the microphones to talk about a wide variety of issues that included a request to remove the security force from the City Hall/Court House building, support for the proposed light rail transit line on University Avenue, opposition to the rail line and its \$840 million cost, more control of spending and a need for more police. Typical of many of the comments were those of a senior citizen who believes he will soon be taxed out of his home or the Mississippi Street property owner who stated his taxes went up 15% and asked "Are we getting 15% more service?"

Finally, one resident noted the lack of a state presence at the hearing asking "Why are there no state representatives present?" (Note: The statute that requires the hearing does not include them.)

Great Northern Business Center Continues To Grow

The old Maxson Steel site at Como and Topping Street has seen a successful transformation that will be completed soon. The 21-acre foundry site had been one of the area's biggest eyesore and one of St. Paul's most underutilized areas. After cleanup and site preparation by the Saint Paul Port Authority, 18 acres were available and purchased by 5 different companies.

Custom Drywall was the first development purchasing 4.1 acres in 2001 followed by Crystal D, Benco Messenger Service, Twin City Glass and Warners' Stellian. When all businesses are fully operational they will provide at least 520 jobs with about half going to neighborhood residents. The companies provided \$16.7 million in private investment while property tax dollars will help pay for the substantial cost to clean up the heavily polluted site.

Meanwhile, the cleanup work is nearly complete at the former *Great Northern Railroad's Dale Street Shops* site straight south of the railroad tracks on Minnehaha Avenue and Dale Street. Ramsey County was able to provide over \$1 million to help clean up the old railroad property using contributions to its Environmental Response Fund (ERF). First authorized by the state legislature in 1997, this fund is supported by a .0001% tax on the principal amount of registered mortgages and deeds. The active sale of properties and refinancing of mortgages in recent years has allowed the fund to grow but it is a "last resort" fund and matching dollars must be found from other sources. These include funds from the state, the federal government, the Metropolitan Council and the city in which the parcel is located. One half of the funds proceeds are targeted for St. Paul and one half targeted to suburban communities to insure a balance.

While the authorization will expire soon, the County Board is requesting that the program continue. To date the \$3 million raised has

helped create 485 new jobs, 939 new housing units, cleaned up about 80 acres of polluted land and leveraged \$212 million in new property value that should generate in excess of \$5.76 million in new property taxes annually. HRA Chair Janice Rettman stated that "Considering the number of jobs we have saved and created, the cleanup of some very polluted, yet ideally located land, the private investment that goes along with this, plus the value of future property taxes I think it is imperative that we continue the deed tax well into the future."

While on the St. Paul City Council and as a County Board member Commissioner Rettman has worked with the Port Authority and its partners to develop dozens of acres of unused railroad property including the Jackson Street Shops, the Maxson Steel site, the Dale Street Shops and the Como Shops, now known as Energy Park.

New Housing Opens In Falcon Heights

Speaking of transformation, the southeast corner of Snelling and Larpenter is looking a lot different as the new Falcon Heights Town Square nears completion. The project, first proposed back in 2002, includes housing for seniors, family apartments, townhouses and retail space. Three retailers, Arthur Williams Optical, Jackson Hewitt and Pizza Hut are already open for business. The developers are looking for a tenant to fill the final space. In addition, Dino's Gyros is operating in their beautiful new space on the northeast corner of the intersection just across from their old location.

A ribbon cutting ceremony to mark the grand opening was held on November 16 and included such dignitaries as Falcon Heights Mayor Sue Gehrz, Met Council Chair Peter Bell, Howard Goldman from HUD, builder George Sherman and Ramsey County Commissioner Janice Rettman. And even though the grand opening was just held, all of the residential units have been already been rented. The new townhomes can be seen in the *Parade of Homes*.

Ramsey County Yard Waste Sites Open For Winter Hours

Arborists recommend that winter is the best time to trim most trees so some of Ramsey County's yard waste sites will again be open during winter months (December – March) to accept yard waste and tree branches. Weather permitting, three sites will be open one weekend per month:

December 17 and 18, 2005
January 14 and 15, 2006
February 11 and 12, 2006
March 11 and 12, 2006

The sites (Midway at Pierce Butler & Prior, Frank & Sims and White Bear Township) will be open on from 9 am – 5 pm on the Saturdays and 11 am – 5 pm on the Sundays listed.

The yard waste sites also accept Christmas trees, however, residents should check with their waste hauler and/or city first. Most haulers and cities provide curbside pick-up of Christmas trees after the holiday season. **Christmas trees accepted at a Ramsey County site must be real trees with all decoration, tinsel, wire and stands removed.** Flocked trees are acceptable but artificial trees, wreaths and swags will not be permitted at the yard waste sites. These items should be put out with regular trash because of the wires and/or plastic materials.

Other items accepted at the yard waste sites at this time include brush, leaves, grass clippings, other soft-bodied plants and all parts of trees, but no stumps which often contain dirt and debris.

All sites will be open on April 6 for the Spring/Summer/Fall schedule.

For more information and site locations go to the County website (www.co.ramsey.mn.us) and click on the *Home and Yard* section of the Health and Environment page.

Volunteers Needed

Ramsey County is always looking for citizens to serve on advisory boards and committees. For further information check the website at www.co.ramsey.mn.us/cb/ma/volunteer.htm or call 651-266-8014.

Community Council Updates

District 5 (651-774-5234)

Neighborhood Action Committee
3rd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
@ Arlington Library

Board of Directors
Every 4th Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.
@ Arlington Library

District 6 (651-488-4485)

Board of Directors
1st Monday

Land Use Task Force
4th Wednesday

District 7 (651-298-5068)

Board of Directors Meeting
2nd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
689 N. Dale Street

District 8 (651-228-1855)

Board of Directors
4th Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.
Hallie Q. Brown Center

District 10 (651-644-3889)

Board of Directors
3rd Tuesday, 7:00 p.m. (location varies)

District 11 (651-646-1986)

Board Meeting
3rd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
1564 Lafond Avenue

Lexington-Hamline (651-644-3207)

Last Monday of each month, 7:00 p.m.
@ Dunning Recreation Center

Snelling-Hamline (651-644-1085)

Board of Directors Meeting
First Thursday of each month, 7:00 p.m.

City of Falcon Heights (651-792-7600)

City Council
2nd and 4th Wednesdays, 7:00 p.m.
Falcon Heights City Hall