

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT

Fall/Winter 2007

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 Maximum Levy Increase

On September 11 the Ramsey County Board approved the maximum budget and property tax levy for 2008. The budget, that is, spending including all sources of revenue, is set at \$566,957,337 which is 2.8% higher than 2007. The maximum tax levy is \$242,474,241, or 5% over the 2007 levy. As you can see, property taxes pay for about 43% of the county's spending. Grants, fees and reimbursements from state and federal agencies make up the difference.

Meanwhile, other taxing jurisdictions adopted their maximum levies including St. Paul with a 15.1% increase, the Saint Paul School District with a 3.8% increase, the Capitol Region Watershed District at 19% (from \$1,338,728 to \$1,644,103) and the Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority with a levy of \$19,938,811 which is equal to the 2006 levy.

Why are my taxes always going up?

"No matter what I do, my taxes always seem to go up..." This is a comment that every property owner can relate to, especially this time of year when local units of government adopt the maximum amount that the levy will be for next

year. This number can go down as 2008 budgets are finalized in December but it cannot go up. In

addition, it is only the total amount that will be taxed or "levied" to pay for next year's services and not the amount individual property owners will be paying. When the actual levy is finally adopted in December it will be divided among all property owners based on a formula set by the state legislature that includes the value of your property.

Keep in mind that some properties, approximately 25% in Saint Paul and much of Falcon Heights, do not pay property taxes at all. These include schools, churches and government buildings. That means that the burden of paying for services is passed on to the remaining properties that must pay. For this reason, some communities have taken some services, such as street maintenance and tree trimming, off of the tax levy and instead assess fees so that all properties that benefit pay. This is not such an easy decision for elected officials because property taxes are deductible from federal income taxes and some assessments are not. To be certain you are taking full advantage of your deductions make sure you review your billed assessments with your tax advisor.

Why is my neighbor's tax bill less than mine?

By state law, every parcel is reviewed every few years to assure that its actual value is as close as possible to the estimated market value upon which it is taxed. To do this, assessors review sales in your area, look at the property from the street to determine the overall condition, review building permits for improvements (repairs such as a new roof or a coat of paint are not improvements), look at the overall neighborhood and compare their notes with previous entries.

If you believe your home is over-valued you can request a review by an assessor. He or she will come to your home by appointment (always ask for an ID), take measurements of the building, look for new additions or removed structures, do a walk through to determine overall condition as well as review any major upgrades. For instance, if you remodeled your kitchen and added top of the line cabinets and marble counter tops the value will be higher than if you used standard fixtures.

The advice here is to do your homework because properties are often worth more than owners think. Make sure you know what recent area sales have been and what records the county already has. If you recently had the property appraised for a new loan, have a copy ready for the assessor. And keep in mind that every door can be opened. The assessor doesn't care what you own or that you aren't a very tidy housekeeper, just that the property is exactly as the record shows. Also, if you bought your home or refinanced in 2007 don't assume that the county's estimated value matches the price you paid. Contact the county to make sure this is the case.

As an aside, you may be surprised to see that the value of your land is a substantial part of the value of your overall property.

And while not a perfect system, it may be better than some countries where it has been reported that the owner recommends a value and the assessor has the option to buy it on the spot for that price. Now that would be a gamble!

If you have comments on the proposed tax levy you should attend the Joint Property Tax Public Hearing on December 11 (6:00 P.M.) at Arlington High School. If you have questions

about your property county staff will be available to discuss your situation. For convenience, bring your 2008 proposed property tax statement which contains vital information.

LRT Cost Estimates Continue To Rise

The Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority, through the Metropolitan Council, received word recently that the cost of the proposed Central Corridor LRT line could be at least \$30 million more than originally planned. For starters, the two-level Washington Avenue Bridge over the Mississippi River would need to be strengthened to support light rail vehicles. This would mean closing the bridge during a long reconstruction period and re-routing some 20,000 vehicles per day to other bridges.

The Central Corridor line, which would run from downtown St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis primarily along University Avenue, is already \$132 million over the federal government's expected \$800 million maximum budget. That budget is based on a formula that includes construction costs, travel time and the number of expected passengers. The Met Council is reviewing possible cuts that could include eliminating a tunnel through the University of Minnesota campus, doing rail work only instead of full street reconstruction in St. Paul, eliminating community-recommended additional stations, as well as stopping the line well short of the Union Depot in St. Paul.

Commissioner Janice Rettman, who served on the Central Corridor Coordinating Committee, stated that the cost increases come as no surprise to her and that "The environmental impact study should be looking at other corridor options like I had suggested. We are now locked into a limited focus and a process that, in the end, may not reach the Union Depot and may not serve St. Paul neighborhoods very well, even though Ramsey County residents are paying for some of the construction, maintenance and operations."

The Commissioner has also always advocated for stations between Rice Street and Snelling Avenue at ½ mile intervals to serve community residents. Other possible changes could include using 3-car trains instead of 2 cars, which would add about \$93 million to the cost. This could be an issue for St. Paul neighborhoods because 3 car trains and the necessary longer stations could

interfere with pedestrian and vehicle traffic at some side streets.

No decisions have been made at this time and details will be finalized over the next few months as the Met Council works on its preliminary engineering study. The study should also identify other, yet unknown, problems such as utility locations. For further information and notices for community meetings check out the Metropolitan Council's website at www.metrocouncil.org/transportation/ccorridor/CCcalendar.htm.

Cayuga Bridge At The Top of the List

Peter Bell, Chair of the Metropolitan Council, visited the Ramsey County Board on September 11th to discuss common issues and areas of interest between the agencies. While transit was a major part of the discussion, Commissioner Janice Rettman reminded him that the I-35E bridge at Cayuga Street (not to be confused with the damaged I-35W bridge) has some serious problems and replacement has been delayed time and again. It remains one of her top priorities, especially since it was intended to be rebuilt in conjunction with the construction of the Met Council's new bus garage a few years ago.

All of the commissioners expressed concern that the vast majority of roadway improvements in the metro area were focused in the Hennepin County/west metro region and that east metro taxpayers need their share of upgrades and repairs to alleviate congestion. They also reminded Mr. Bell that east metro residents pay a substantial amount in various road-use taxes. The good news is that the Maryland Avenue Bridge over I-35E will be re-built in 2008.

Commissioner Recommends ID's For County Assessors

After receiving some complaints about unknown "proglers" looking at property, Commissioner Janice Rettman determined that they were Ramsey County tax assessors out doing their annual reviews. In order to avoid any confusion or having the police called on assessors the Commissioner recommended that assessors wear some sort of identifiable clothing in addition to their badge ID.

Commissioner Rettman said that "I have many stay-at-home-parents and retirees who are the eyes and ears of their neighborhoods. They call the police when they see something amiss, which is exactly what we want. On the other hand we also want employees to be able to do their job efficiently so I wanted this fixed by next year. I have even offered to pay for vests or shirts out of my own pocket if it helps."

Is Your Homestead Classification Accurate?

With property taxes rising due to many factors we continue to stress that property owners make sure that the county's records are accurate. For residential property owners there is a significant difference in the amount you pay as a result of the credits applied for homestead property. If you made any of the changes listed below in 2007 you may need to apply for homestead classification, if you have already not done so. If your not sure where you stand, the proposed property tax statement you recently received should indicate your status.

- You became a new owner;
- You changed your residence or mailing address;
- You changed your marital status;
- You changed your name; or
- You added or removed an owner of the property.

If there is no change in your status from last year then nothing needs to be done. If you still have questions or need further information contact Ramsey County Department of Records and Revenue on-line at <http://rrinfo.co.ramsey.mn.us/index.asp> or calling 651-266-2000. You can also look up your property records on the website.

Have You Filed For Your Property Tax Refund?

In Minnesota, homeowners and renters may be eligible for a refund on their property taxes if they meet certain income criteria. For 2007, the income limit for a renter is \$50,430 and the household limit is \$93,480 for homesteaded property owners. In addition, a special refund is available for people whose property taxes increased by more than 12% over the previous year and at least \$100.

To receive your refund you must file Form M1PR before August 15th. However, because many eligible people did not file for their refund in 2007, the Department of Revenue is allowing additional time to file, plus you may also be able to file for the previous year if you did not do so.

For further information on the rebate or to get an M1PR form check with the Department of Revenue at 651-296-3781 or on their website at www.taxes.state.mn.us/taxes/index.shtml

Truth-In-Taxation Public Hearing Set

Ramsey County, the City of Saint Paul and the St. Paul School District are seeking your comments on their proposed 2008 budgets. Because Ramsey County now uses a two-year budget cycle this will also include the proposed 2009 budget. A joint public hearing has been set for **December 11, 2007 at Arlington High School (1495 Rice Street)** in St. Paul.

Specific information on your property taxes can be found on the truth-in-taxation statement you received in the mail recently. County budget information is available from the County Manager's Office (266-8000) or on-line at [www.co.ramsey.mn.us/ba/index .htm](http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/ba/index.htm).

In addition, county staff will be available at the hearing to discuss your property status, market value and other information with you to help determine that you are not paying more than you should be. Bring your Truth-In-Taxation notice with you to help speed up their search process.

Watershed District Adopts Pond Rules

The Capitol Region Watershed District recently adopted some of the state's most comprehensive rules governing drainage and wetland protection. The new rules, which are now in effect help guide redevelopment in the district in an effort to maintain water quality. In addition, more concrete and asphalt means more run-off adding to flooding and pollution that impacts people who live downstream.

Established in 1998, the Capitol Region Watershed District covers about 40 square miles in Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Saint Paul, Roseville and Maplewood. It has 5 board

members that are appointed by the County Board and a seven person support staff to manage programs and do educational outreach. There are a number of watershed districts within Ramsey County that operate independently but generally have the same focus – protecting surface waters in Ramsey County and minimizing excess flow during rainy seasons. This is especially important since much of Ramsey County is covered in asphalt and concrete and most natural ponding areas have been filled in.

The Capitol Region's rules are intended to be part of a cooperative arrangement to control run-off rather than being adversarial to land owners. Some of the suggested activities include adding rain gardens that contain flowers and shrubs that can survive temporary flooding in order to reduce the rush of water into our sewers or using an asphalt system that allows rainwater to seep through. The Board's most visible projects to date include a variety of activities to clean up Como Lake and add native vegetation to filter pollutants.

Volunteers Needed

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners is always looking for volunteers to assist staff, programs and to advise the Board on issues that come before it. At this time there are vacancies on the Workforce Investment Board which helps develop policies to identify community workforce needs as well as guiding the county's Workforce Solutions Department prepare programs for workers under the Workforce Investment Act.

There are also vacancies on

- The Community Corrections Advisory Board;
- The Community Health Services Advisory Committee;
- The Parks and Recreation Commission
- The Ramsey-Washington Metro Watershed District.

For this and other volunteer opportunities you can contact the county at 651-266-4090 or www.co.ramsey.mn.us/cb/ma/volunteer.htm