

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT

Spring 2009

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, send an e-mail to janice.rettman@co.ramsey.mn.us or send a note to us, Room 220 ,City Hall/Court House, 15 West Kellogg Boulevard, St. Paul, MN 55102.

Central Corridor TIF Districts

After several hours of meetings, multiple questions and long discussion, the Ramsey County Board approved a resolution to support St. Paul's request to the state legislature to extend the length of time for four Tax Increment Finance (TIF) districts in or near the Central Corridor for another 8 to 15 years. As proposed, funds collected would be used to help pay for public improvements such as new sidewalks, upscale lighting, trees and irrigation systems along University Avenue. The improvements would be made in conjunction with the construction of the proposed light rail transit.

Under TIF legislation, cities and counties can establish districts and use excess tax proceeds to pay for property clean-up, roads and other basic public improvements. The intent is to take under-utilized, vacant or run down property and create an opportunity for re-development under the theory that new development will increase both property values and taxes in the district that should then reduce taxes for other properties in the city. The "tax increment" used to pay for the

improvements is the increased amount from the original value to the new value established when the property has been improved. In general, these TIF districts should be paid off, or "defeased", as soon as possible in order for the rest of the taxpayers to benefit generally within 20 years but not more than 25.

Commissioner Janice Rettman was the lone vote against the St. Paul plan. During discussions she stated that this would be a broken promise to the taxpayers and that there are other ways to fund the improvements the city is hoping to be able to do. She also said that she voted for the original TIF districts when she served on the city council and could not go back on her promise to end them as soon as possible.

Another of the Commissioner's big concerns is that funds would first be used outside of the districts to buy property and make improvements downtown leaving little for University Avenue. She noted that the downtown TIF districts have not performed very well and cannot be closed anytime soon. This places a huge burden on St. Paul's residential properties.

As for Saint Paul, the proposal would provide about \$37,370,000 for improvements and cost about \$74,445,000 over the life of the district. It would also provide only about 27% of the total funding of the \$158,000,000 needed by the city for the project.

Other issues raised by the Board include funds were being targeted to pay for mitigation of negative impacts the LRT would cause during and after construction. For instance, as proposed, over 90% of the parking along University Avenue will be lost once the project is complete and it is the responsibility of the Metropolitan Council to find and pay for ways to replace that parking for local businesses. However, the Met Council has not allocated dollars to fund impact mitigation nor does it intend to do so because of the tight budget constraints. The University of Minnesota and Minnesota Public Radio have already reached agreements with the Met Council who will pay significantly to mitigate expected impacts on their properties.

Finally, throughout the process Commissioner Rettman recommended that the County be held harmless should the TIF extension be approved. This means that the county would continue to receive its share of the increased tax revenue, amounting to about \$1.8 million once the districts are closed based on current value. Staff could not estimate how much more the county might receive when improvements are made.

On March 24 the County Board voted 5-1 to support the city's request. Commissioner Rettman cast the lone no vote raising her prior objections but also noting that the proposed legislation dramatically changes the use of TIF, including expenditures for things strictly prohibited at the present time, and that there is a significant amount (10%) being drawn off the top to support city services rather than public improvements. In breaking news, the legislature appears to have agreed because it declined to approve the request for some of the same reasons.

NACo Prescription Discount Program

If the cost of prescription drugs is getting out of control for you Ramsey County may have a program to help. The National Association of Counties offers its Drug Discount Card Program

to counties throughout the nation to assist in reducing the cost of prescription drugs. Nearly one-third of all counties participate including 28 in Minnesota.

The program is mainly designed to help the uninsured or underinsured but it also may help people who have high co-pays for prescriptions. In Ramsey County, users averaged 21.27% in savings per prescription each year for the last three years. Over 900 county residents used the cards each for an average of 2,200 prescriptions.

This is not an insurance program so there is no enrollment form, no membership fees, no limits on how many times the card may be used and no income limits. Plus, most of our pharmacies accept the card. Perhaps the best part is that there is no cost to NACo, to participating counties or to the users.

Cards are available at Ramsey County Offices, County Libraries, some city libraries and community health clinics.

For further information contact the County at 651-266-1000. For a list of participating pharmacies or locations where you can pick up a card check the county website at <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/cp/RXCard.htm>

St. Paul's Virtual Block Club

The Saint Paul Police Department has created a "virtual block club" for businesses and residents. The club provides for two-way communication between the department and the community to receive crime alerts, public information, active criminal activity, crime trends in neighborhoods and up-coming events. The Department may also use it to ask for citizen help in identifying or finding a suspect or to look for witnesses.

Citizens will be able to provide the police with information or ask that selected notices or information be forwarded to the others on the list. If approved, those requests will reach all VBC members so other citizens and businesses can benefit from information or experience.

To sign up, send an email to sppd-vbc@ci.stpaul.mn.us. For more information contact Pam McCreary at 651-266-5625 or pam.mccreary@ci.stpaul.mn.us.

Economic Stimulus

We have been hearing a lot about “economic stimulus dollars” and “shovel-ready projects” in the news lately and it sounds like tax dollars are flowing back to states, cities and counties like water from an open faucet. But what does it all mean?

At the local level, it is difficult to determine just how much will be coming in from the federal government because of the competition, timing and the requirements.

First, the funds are supposed to add new jobs and not supplant dollars for existing ones that could be otherwise cut, or fund jobs that are going to happen anyway (i.e. projects that are already in the works and with funding sources already committed).

Secondly, the funds have restrictions and will require strict procedures for accountability. Basically that means they must be used as intended, records kept to demonstrate that goals were met and they may not be diverted for another use if a project or program does not proceed as planned.

Third, in general, shovel-ready means that the planning has been well underway and that the only holdup is funding. In Minnesota, many road projects meet this criteria but the lack of state and federal funding has not allowed it to proceed. An example might be deteriorating bridges.

In Ramsey County, staff is carefully reviewing the criteria and availability for funds in many departments. In addition to construction projects, there are dollars available for services that are needed for people affected by the economy or returning from active duty in the military.

There are also funds to help cities deal with foreclosed properties and the Ramsey County Housing and Redevelopment Authority will be looking for ways to help communities as well as ways to get tax-forfeited properties back on the tax rolls.

The intent of the package is to stimulate the economy through job creation, reducing deficits and local impacts created by the faltering economy, and helping people make it through

this transition. The Ramsey County HRA, chaired by Commissioner Rettman and staffed Denise Beigbeder and Mary Lou Egan, announced that it has already been notified that they will receive about \$1.7 million for work in suburban Ramsey County.

Taxes..taxes..taxes...

There has been a lot of discussion in the state legislature on finding ways to resolve the state’s budget problems. Some concern how to fill shortfalls for funds already spent in 2008 while other discussions focus on the 2009-2010 budget. Regardless, because of the economy, all tax revenues are much lower than when the current state budget was adopted.

At the end of 2008 the governor, using his powers, unallocated (took back) several million dollars from cities and counties, even though some of it had already been spent. For Ramsey County, that was over \$4 million that then had to be replaced with county funds. Fortunately, because of good financial planning and the fact that departments delayed filling open positions, the county was able to absorb those cuts.

However, for the 2010 and 2011 budgets the county expects to face major cuts because much of the county’s spending is on behalf of the state, particularly for services to assist people in need. For most of these services not only does the state tell counties what they must do, they also provide funding. Three things can happen: (1) the state can reduce its allocations yet require the same level of services which would require counties to pick up the extra cost by increasing property taxes; (2) the state can legislate lower levels of service and reduce its funding; or (3) and least likely, the state can maintain the status quo with both services and funding.

One plan still being discussed is to have counties adopt a local sales tax to help pay their costs rather than using property taxes. Based on past experience, this plan was not well received. Commissioner Rettman, along with Commissioners Ortega and Reinhardt, served on the Joint Property Tax Advisory Committee and the Property Tax Advisory Group with City Council members Helgen, Stark and Lantry reviewing financial and service impacts and solutions. Stay tuned ...

Food Budget A Little Tight?

In January of 2007, Fare For All, an emergency food distribution network, expanded to include a new model similar to a traveling grocery store. Prepared food packs are sold on a variety of days and times at sites around the Twin Cities metro area, including the Emergency Foodshelf Network warehouse location. Participants pay a fee and take the food home on the same day.

The St. Paul Building and Construction Trades Council, the Regional Labor Federation and other local unions have teamed up with the Emergency Foodshelf Network to make the packages available for anyone at their site at 411 Main Street. Upcoming dates are May 19, June 23, July 21 and August 25 from 11:00 to 1:00.

A Regular Pack costs \$17 and includes 4 or more fresh vegetables, 2 or more fresh fruits and 3-4 frozen meats. The Meat Only Pack is \$12, the Vegetarian Pack \$10 and the Monthly Special Pack price varies. Payment must be in cash, EBT cards, credit cards or debit cards.

The program is open to anyone, so you don't have to be a union member or have a limited income, just a desire for quality food and a nutritious diet. For further information go to the website at www.fareforall.org or call Lynn Larkin-Wright at the Saint Paul labor Studies and Resource Center at 651-22-3787-ext. 16.

There is no limit on the number of packs you can buy, so pick one for the senior citizens in your family who can't get around very well.

Does Your Property Have An Old Well?

There is an estimated 27,000 private wells in Ramsey County, most are unused due to the continued expansion of the municipal water systems that provide clean, safe, tested drinking water.

State law requires all property owners apply to the state for any new well and that every property owner must give written notice to a buyer of the location of any known wells upon sale of the property.

Wells are serious business because, no matter how shallow, they provide opportunities for contaminants – poisons – to be injected directly

into underground aquifers raising both health and security concerns. In a poorly maintained system, contaminants like lawn fertilizer and animal waste can be carried into or down along the well pipe every time it rains or there is spring run-off. Additionally, as pipes decay, contaminants can enter the well pipes under the surface without being detected. Once in the aquifer, contaminants spread throughout the system, over time, threatening other peoples' water, not just that under the property where the well is located.

If a well is abandoned, it should be sealed completely as soon as possible by a qualified person. The Ramsey County Conservation District is responsible for groundwater (different than surface water like lakes and ponds) and can provide technical assistance in maintaining or sealing wells. It may also have some limited Funds available to help with the cost of sealing wells. For further information contact them at 651-266-7270.

Commissioner Receives A Heart

As you know, the many Block Nurse programs provide excellent service to help senior citizens stay in their own homes as well as an opportunity for volunteers to work in their community. One such program is the North End/South Como Block Nurse program that honors its volunteers at an event each year. In a total surprise at this year's event, Ramsey County Commissioner Janice Rettman was awarded the Heart-of-Gold pin from the organization. In accepting the award, Janice reiterated that it was the fantastic volunteers, staff and NE/SC Board that actually deserves the credit and the award more than her. However, she has been seen in the Court House and in the community proudly displaying her new heart and promoting the work of the organizations and their volunteer.

And Speaking of Volunteers,

Ramsey County is always looking for people to serve on various advisory committees or assist departments in their work. For a list of service opportunities in your area of interest you can check out the Ramsey County website at www.co.ramsey.mn.us/cm/volunteer/index.htm Or call 651-266-8014 for advisory committee vacancies.

District Council News and Schedules

District 5 (651-774-5234)
www.paynephalen.org/index.html

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

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

District 6 (651-488-4485)
www.district6stpaul.org/

Board of Directors
1st Monday, 6:30 p.m.
North Dale Recreation Center

Land Use Task Force
4th Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.

District 7 (651-298-5068)
www.d7mix.org/

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

District 8 (651-228-1855)
www.summit-u.com/

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

District 10 (651-644-3889)
www.comopark.org/

Board of Directors Meeting
3rd Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.
@ Como Park Historic Street Car Station

District 11 (651-646-1986)
www.hamlinmidwaycoalition.org

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

District 12 (651-649-5992)
www.district6stpaul.org/

Board of Directors Meeting

2nd Thursday, 7:00 p.m.
@ 890 Cromwell Avenue

District 13 (651-645-6887)
www.unionparkdc.org/

Board of Directors Meeting
1st Wednesday, 7:00 p.m.
Merriam Park Community Center

City of Falcon Heights (651-792-7600)
www.ci.falcon-heights.mn.us

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