

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT

Summer 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.

Budget Hearings Set

Ramsey County residents will have two opportunities to comment on the 2010-11 budget and 2010 property tax levy.

The first is a public hearing on

**Friday, October 30
City Hall/Court House
15 West Kellogg Boulevard
3rd floor Council Chambers.**

The hearing begins at 8:30 A.M. and continues until all public testimony is completed.

The second is on

**Monday, November 30
Roseville Area High School Cafeteria
1240 County road B2 West**

This hearing begins at 6:30 P.M. and continues until all public testimony is completed.

While it is not necessary, we suggest that you contact Bonnie Jackelen at 651-266-8014 if you wish to speak. In order to accommodate everyone, speaking times may be limited.

County Board Discusses Budget

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners has spent September and October listening to county departments explain the intricacies of their proposed 2010/2011 budgets. This is the second two-year budget that will be adopted since the Board changed the process in 2007. Prior to that, budgets were dealt with on an annual basis. Department budgets may not change significantly from year to year but the property tax levy can vary greatly depending on the multitude of payments, grants and aids the county receives from the federal government, state government or other agencies and foundations. By law the levy must be adopted annually.

The County manager has proposed a 2010 budget of \$569,472,287 which is an .8% increase (\$4,588,589) over 2009. For 2011, the

proposed budget is \$582,698,876 which is 2.3% (\$13,226,289) over 2010.

After hearing from the departments the board will deliberate and make adjustments as they deem necessary to set priorities that meet the needs of county residents as well as the mandates required by the state and federal governments. The final budget and accompanying levy will be adopted on December 13th.

In addition to the county budget, the Board will review and adopt the 2010/2011 Regional rail Authority budget. The County Manager has recommended a levy of \$19,938,811 for each year which shows no increase from 2009. Of that, \$3.3 million will be spent for operations and \$46.5 for capital projects, primarily for improvements to the Union Depot and the counties portion of the cost to build the Central Corridor light rail system.

Since the Ramsey County Library System does not include Saint Paul, the budget and levy for that system is approved at the same time but is only applied to suburban communities. In addition, while it has the authority to do so, the county does not levy for activities of the Housing and Redevelopment Authority which also only affects suburban communities.

Pierce Butler Extension Continues To Raise Questions

The city of Saint Paul has again proposed that Pierce Butler Route be extended to the east from just west of Dale Street and connected to the Phalen Boulevard via Empire Drive, instead of Pennsylvania Avenue. On July 1st the Saint Paul City Council authorized Public Works staff to begin acquiring properties and provided up to \$5 million for that purpose. Three properties have been identified for acquisition in Phase I of the project; 388 Como (former A-I auto salvage yard), railroad property between Dale and Arundel and Super Foods/Global Market at 630 Pierce Butler Route.

This project was first considered by the city several years ago and a team was put together to work on the roadway design. Unfortunately, no one from the affected community was involved. The project then languished for a number of

years only to be revived in a different form late last year. In the meantime, residents believed the plan was no longer on the table and two businesses now targeted for acquisition have recently made millions of dollars worth of new investment in the community.

The city has submitted its proposal to the state and the Federal Highway Administration for funding. However, because Pierce Butler is a Ramsey County road, the application required a letter from the County at least stating that it did not oppose the proposed extension. No letter from the county has been submitted nor has the county considered or appropriated funds for an extension of the Route east or west. In addition, an extension is not a part of the county's 10-year transportation plan (TIP).

For her part, Commissioner Janice Rettman, whose district encompasses much of Pierce Butler Route, has actively proposed that any extension plan must be a part of the big picture, not just a piece meal action. Also, she has consistently requested that the community, residents and businesses alike, be meaningfully engaged in the discussion on both the east and west ends of the Route before any proposal is submitted. Absent that effort, and after reviewing the *Environmental Assessment Worksheet* submitted by the city, the Commissioner submitted 13 pages of questions, comments, identified inaccuracies or inadequate review to the city for inclusion in the federal review. Among them are: (1) the fact that there is a possible west connection to Minneapolis' Granary Road; (2) making Pierce Butler a truck route from the east end of the city into Minneapolis impacting several St. Paul neighborhoods on its western boundary; (3) the BNSF Railroad could use the new road to connect and expand its truck transfer yards; (4) the proposed light rail transit may not allow truck traffic on University Avenue; (5) all traffic east of Dale will be diverted to Minnehaha in a residential area, at least until Phase 2 is completed several years from now; (6) a number of businesses and good paying jobs will be lost to the community; (7) additional property will be removed from the tax rolls increasing property taxes on other properties; (8) the affected community has not been involved or in some cases not even notified about the proposed changes; and, (9) the proposal would have a direct impact on a county road that could require

significant improvements due to the increase in heavy traffic.

With the council's July approval, city staff will begin talks with property owners in an effort to buy them out. If not successful, the city could use its powers of eminent domain to acquire the necessary properties. It is believed that it will cost much more than the initial \$5 million approved for acquisition. Three of the properties slated for acquisition alone are valued at just under \$5 million and will pay over \$167,000 in property taxes this year. In addition to paying the value of the property, the city will need to assist in finding a new location and pay the cost of relocation. Additional expenses, such as the loss of business and income could be negotiated.

One of the biggest questions that remains is what happens east of the Western/Como intersection. Veolia, which provides much-needed jobs and services to the surrounding area, would lose most of its site so it could not continue at that location. It could be difficult, and expensive, to find another site in the city for it to move to as required.

The city has stated that the 2-mile construction project is estimated to cost \$50 million and have requested \$25 million in federal funds, \$15 million from the state of Minnesota. The plan also includes \$10 million from the city itself, primarily capital improvement funds. If funding is approved as hoped, construction for Phase I (Grotto to Arundel) would begin in 2011 and Phase II, Arundel to Phalen Boulevard) in 2012.

County Works To Identify State Cuts

Governor Tim Pawlenty has finally made most of the cuts he needs to make to fill the shortfall in the state budget. Ramsey County officials are now going through the documents to determine the impact those cuts will have on county government and county residents. A first pass suggests that the county, which already suffered through unallotments in 2008 and 2009, implemented a soft hiring freeze and held unfilled positions vacant, should be fairly well off for 2009 and 2010. However, it will likely see significant cuts in human services for 2011 through 2013.

The county manager has proposed a 2010 and 2011 budget that limits the county property tax increase to less than 3% each year and the county board has shown no desire to use property taxes to make up for the loss of state funds to fill gaps or to meet new mandates.

What is "unallotment" anyway?

Under state law, the legislature, with the approval of the governor, determines how and when money from the state will be spent during each 2-year budget cycle. However, the amount spent cannot exceed the amount expected to be raised during the cycle and the books must balance at the end of the cycle. Also under state law, the commissioner of finance, with approval of the governor, has the ability to stop payments, collect unspent funds that have been given to departments, agencies and other units of government and, in some cases, even collect funds that have already been spent when the budget does not balance. This process is called unallotment. Because the commissioner is appointed by the governor, it is often the governor who makes the decisions on where and when to cut.

Light Rail Keeps Chugging Along

On August 11th the Metropolitan Council reported that they received nearly 200 comments on the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), 90% (171) of which dealt with the section on Washington Avenue through the University of Minnesota campus. Issues there deal with noise, vibration and traffic flow because the rails will be close to labs and science buildings and because the street will now be closed to traffic thus limiting access to parking ramps and facilities. Negotiations continue with U of M staff.

Meanwhile, residents in the Frogtown and Summit-University areas continue in their attempts to get the Met Council to deal with the loss of parking and to add 3 stations. Those areas will be underserved since stations will be about one 1 mile apart, unlike the Minneapolis and downtown sections which will have stations about every ½ mile, or less. In addition, nearly 90% of the on-street parking will be lost making access to local businesses difficult at best unless alternative sites are found. While it is the

responsibility of the Met Council to mitigate, the negative impacts it creates if the system is built, to this point they have left that responsibility to the city of St. Paul to fix. For their part, Saint Paul officials are trying to find funds to solve the parking problem and to upgrade the sidewalks and boulevards.

Another problem not addressed and seemingly being ignored is the fact that, while everyone seems to recognize that many people will drive to stations to get on the train, no park-and-ride facilities are planned.

Ramsey County Commissioner Janice Rettman was one of three elected officials to comment on the FEIS. In her letter dated July 24, 2009 she reiterated that the county had identified and adopted a long list of issues that needed to be dealt with by Met Council in the EIS but few, if any, had been satisfactorily addressed. "My review of the FEIS is that it lacks the specificity and the REQUISITE dollars and firm commitments by the Metropolitan Council to address many if not all of the concerns and issues enumerated in our document."

Ironically, the United States Environmental Protection, in its review of the FEIS, asked that the Record of Decision (ROD) address some of the same issues that Commissioner Rettman – and the community – have been demanding resolution on for more than three years. In a letter dated July 27, 2009 EPA supervisor Kenneth Westlake, stated "We recommend the ROD include specific plans for parking loss mitigation, completion of the three proposed additional stations, and continued discussions with the Rondo community about cumulative impacts regarding community cohesion and function."

According to Met Council staff, the FDEIS submittal closes the environmental review process and they will request a "letter of prejudice" that would show full support from the Federal Transportation Administration with an expectation that the FTA's share of the cost would be fully funded. That would permit construction to begin and engineering details worked out.

In another twist, newly calculated numbers show that the cost effectiveness index, a major calculation used to review federally funded

projects and allocate funds, would permit the installation of the three University Avenue stations the community has demanded. These would cost about \$5.2 million each. However, requested alterations at the U of M alone would use up those funds (about \$15 million) and more - \$16.6 million more. The FTA now begins its final review as it compares the Central Corridor proposal to numerous others from other cities seeking a portion of the limited available funds.

Record of Decision Issued

Since that update to the Ramsey County Board, the Met Council reported on its website that on Aug. 18, the Federal Transit Administration issued a *Record of Decision*, documenting its finding that the Metropolitan Council has satisfied requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for this project. "It's another important step forward," said Council Chair Peter Bell. "It positions us to move into final design this fall, win a commitment of 50-percent federal funding and start construction next year."

In the document, the FTA concluded that the Council has given all interested parties "adequate opportunity" to present their concerns. Indeed, it said the project's public involvement activities have included "extensive and intentional efforts to engage minority and low-income communities" in the project planning.

The agency also stated in its Record of Decision that "All reasonable steps have been taken to minimize the adverse effects of the proposed project and where adverse environmental effects remain, no feasible and prudent alternative to avoid or further mitigate such effects exists,"

In response, Commissioner Rettman said that "Since no real dollars have been set aside to address the substantive issues like the loss of parking, gentrification, jobs and reduced bus service, it appears that the city, the county, University Avenue residents and businesses and our neighborhoods that will be directly impacted by LRT on University should not expect their concerns to be addressed or the problems fixed. That would be a huge disappointment and it is not acceptable. I will continue to work to hold the Met Council accountable for their responsibilities."