

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT

Spring 2013

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.

County Board Takes Issue With MNDOT Plan

On Tuesday, February 26th Wayne Norris from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT) and Ramsey County Public Works Director Jim Tolaas gave the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners an update on the proposed improvements to I-35E between Cayuga Street and Little Canada. New to the plan is the inclusion of a MnPass lane similar to the one on I-94 west of Minneapolis. This will be an additional interior lane in each direction for high-occupancy vehicles and solo drivers who pay for access. The lanes will require widening of the freeway and removing and replacing the existing bridges.

The Board presentation was simply a staff update and no board action was required because three support resolutions with conditions have been previously adopted by the Board.

Following the presentation, Commissioner Janice Rettman gave her own update and expectations on the neighborhood requests

related to the MnPASS lane and freeway reconstruction. She reminded all that the Board had already taken action giving clear direction to staff. That direction included the requirement that the existing state trail between Cayuga and Maryland, scheduled for removal, be replaced to allow residents on both sides of the freeway easy access to jobs, trails and recreational opportunities. The MNDOT plan includes part of a trail on the west side of the freeway that would abruptly end at Maryland near the bridge. MNDOT then proposes that Maryland, with all of its truck and auto traffic, be used as the east/west connection.

Rettman pointed out that (1) federal environmental justice rules require mitigation with an equal or better facility, (2) even at quiet times Maryland is a very busy street that is difficult to get across, (3) numerous accidents already occur on Maryland in this area, (4) the proposed replacement "path" does not allow access to the Gateway State Trail and Trout Brook Regional Trail, (5) it does not allow safe bike or pedestrian traffic west across the Maryland Bridge and (6) that access to the trail

on the west of I-35E is either a 10' drop from the bridge or a long travel on the busy and narrow L'Orient Street.

All 5 of the other Commissioners present jumped into the conversation supporting Rettman, expressing disappointment in the plan and also pointing out their strong sentiment for trails and functional connections. The county already has a policy for "complete streets" that encourages pedestrian paths, bike paths, sidewalks and trails as appropriate.

At one point Norris pointed out that the city of Saint Paul had not recommended the path for inclusion when the city council approved to local agreement. Commissioner Jim McDonough stated that he didn't care what the city did or did not want. "I thought we made it clear that the path was a county priority. And that it needed to be included."

At another point both Norris and Tolaas explained that the cost of the path could be as much as \$2.5 million if built to standards. Board Chair Rafael Ortega said he didn't care what the cost was. He said that this is a \$228 million project and the path is a key piece. "You have not presented any options for us to choose from."

Although time didn't allow full discussion, sound walls were also a point of contention. The neighborhoods asked for concrete walls with decorative patterns and MNDOT proposed wood walls unless the city or county paid for the upgrades. Rettman, using examples in her presentation, pointed out that MNDOT does not maintain sound walls or does a very poor job of maintaining wooden sound walls including timely removal of graffiti from both sides.

The meeting ended with a direction from the Board for staff to go back and re-negotiate and then return with a plan to construct and pay for a connected path for the neighbor-hoods on the east and west sides of the freeway. Failure to do so could result in the county withdrawing its funding of \$163,514.74.

This is a multi-phase, multi-year project that will cost approximately \$228 million. Funding will come from a number of sources including the

state, federal transportation funds, Ramsey County contributions and city of Saint Paul funds in the form of transportation grants and capital improvement bond funds.

Work will continue in 2013 with reconstruction of the freeway from Maryland Avenue south to University Avenue, replacement of the Cayuga Bridge, the Pennsylvania Avenue Bridge and the railroad bridges along I-35E. A new interchange will be added at Cayuga and the interchange at Pennsylvania Avenue will be eliminated

TCAAP Site Update

The proposed county purchase of the former Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant (TCAAP) site in Arden Hills for \$28 million is now in the hands of the federal government. What happens next seems to be more questions rather than answers. The purchase agreement must be presented to Congress and then a committee makes a recommendation based on the staff report. No one knows what the committee may do, when it may take action nor the timeline thereafter. A decision is hoped for by mid-April.

In addition, the failure of Congress and the Administration to come to a budget agreement has forced the implementation of the sequestration plan. This plan is a series of cuts to the many departments and agencies of the federal government that, when fully implemented will have unknown impacts on states, cities, and counties. Both the Army, that owns the property, and the General Services Administration, that maintains it, may have staff cuts and re-organizations that put the purchase process on hold. But no one knows at this point.

Here at home, the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners approved the annual Capital Improvement Program budget and bond sale on Tuesday, March 12th. That budget includes \$12 million in bonds for the purchase of the TCAAP property which would then be paid back out of the County Environmental Charge (CEC) Fund. This fund (also called the Solid Waste Fund) is supported by fees on garbage collection bills and by state law must be used for recycling, reuse and other efforts to reduce the amount of solid waste going into landfills. Under the county's plan the CEC fund would then be replenished

when the property is cleaned up, prepared for development and finally sold. Commissioner Janice Rettman voted against the CIP bond sale because of the inclusion of funds for TCAAP.

The TCAAP site is a federal Superfund contaminated site encompassing 2,370 acres. More than 600 acres were declared surplus in 2002. The cost to clean the property to standards for residential use is estimated at more than \$22 million but the GSA has already spent over \$200 million and will continue to monitor wells for pollutants for many years to come.

VOA Proposes Inmate Housing

After losing their appeal to the Saint Paul City Council to create a home for federal prisoners in the building at 1394 Jackson Street the Volunteers of America (VOA) are looking for other options for programming in Ramsey County.

The VOA had proposed a facility for 74 inmates who are in the last months of serving sentences in federal prisons on the Jackson Street site. That proposal required a variance from the zoning code that allows no more than 16 individuals. And because such use is not directly permitted under the city code at that location, a conditional use permit would also be required. Both needed to be approved by the city's planning commission in order to proceed but were not. The City Council upheld that decision.

In January of this year the VOA proposed to use the Jackson Street site for a 16-bed residential chemical treatment program. According to Minnesota rules, such a program requires a letter from the affected district council "indicating support or non-support" if the property is located in Saint Paul. The District 6-North End/South Como Land Use Task Force held a hearing on the matter on January 22nd. After discussing the merits the committee determined that the site is properly zoned for such a program when limited to 16 beds and voted unanimously to support both the VOA and the residential facility.

In a related action, the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners approved a lease extension for the VOA to use the county's Woodview Detention Center for its Residential Re-entry Program until December 31, 2015 with the

possibility for three one-year extensions after that. The rent for the first year is \$160,000 and then increasing 2% each year thereafter. The agreement allows the VOA to use the property only if their funding request from the Federal Bureau of Prisons is approved yet it allows the county to end the lease after 2015 should a developer be found for the surplus property. The VOA will need to come back to the Board each year for approval of the lease extensions.

The Board has already stated that its goal is to get the 26 acre Woodview property on the tax rolls in the near future but the economic downturn has made it difficult to find a solid buyer for this property or the old County Jail/West Government Center located on the riverfront in Downtown Saint Paul.

Energy Grants for the Central Corridor

On Tuesday, March 12th the Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority approved a grant from the Corridors of Opportunity Program to help businesses in the Central Corridor achieve energy reductions. According to the report, the project "combines technical expertise from the energy services providers and business professionals with information from business and property owners in an approach that is expected to result in strategies for energy and resource efficiency outreach, training and implementation." That is a lot of jargon to say that the effort is to get businesses together to share what things they do to effectively save on their energy bills.

The Neighborhood Development Center, located in Frogtown, will receive \$137,700 to carry out the program including \$20,000 for a pilot project to install such things as hood fan controls, set-back thermostats re-fridgerator and freezer door gaskets. These are low-cost, high-payback items that reduce energy usage. The next steps are yet to be laid out but interested businesses can contact the Center at 651-291-2480.

University Avenue Growth

With the completion of the light rail system along University Avenue a number of new projects could change the face of the

Community over the next few years. First, the Old Home Foods building at Western and University has been purchased, will be redeveloped and some new retail and housing space added.

In addition, the building addition on the south side will be removed and a new parcel created for the construction of eight townhomes. The homes will be constructed by MCASA Homes which is a partnership of Model Cities and the Aurora/St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation.

As planned, the homes will be affordable for low to moderate income households. Two and three bedroom units will be available and include a single-car garage underneath. The homes, covering approximately 21,000 square feet of the site will face Western or Aurora Avenues and also have a semi-private open space in the back. The MCASA program provides counseling on home ownership, financial management assistance and other advice on how to succeed as a new home owner.

The Brownstone Building at University and Victoria currently has Model Cities offices and commercial space for small, minority-owned businesses. However, Model Cities is making plans to remove the building and construct a 4-story structure with retail space on the ground floor. Upper floors will contain Model Cities offices and affordable work-force housing. Included in the plan is underground parking, a community room fitness center and a hidden “pocket park”.

Model Cities is also completing plans for a new building at 771-785 University (between Avon and Grotto Streets). As planned, the Central Exchange will be a three-story structure with about 6,000 square feet of commercial space on the ground floor and 28 units of workforce housing on the upper two floors. Parking for the commercial space will be located in the rear and underground parking will be available for the residents. The building will be broken up rather than having a single height both along University and along Avon. A green roof will provide a rooftop garden and community space for residents. If feasible, the building will also

have geo-thermal heat and cooling and solar panels to reduce electrical costs.

All three of these projects are considered transit oriented development (TOD) that is designed to connect residents, businesses and customers with direct access to public transportation. And, yes, most of Saint Paul was designed and built around the original street car system making it the fore-runner of TOD.

Frogtown Explores Ways To Save Homes

The number of foreclosures, walk-a-ways and simply abandoned properties in Saint Paul’s Frogtown neighborhood has had a dramatic impact on that community. Vacant and boarded up houses lower property values, attract thieves and draw criminal activity to a solid residential area. In addition, the area loses good people some of whom leave their homes behind due to financial crisis and others, who can afford to move, do so out of frustration in the lack of progress.

Banks, other lenders and even local government sit on the properties for years sometimes and do as little as possible to maintain them or sell the houses quickly to qualified buyers. Thieves break in and take anything of value like woodwork and plumbing, in some cases leaving gas leaking and water flowing. The city’s solution is to get in and tear them down as quickly as possible leaving vacant land for some future use. None of this helps re-build the tax base or the neighborhood.

On Tuesday, March 26th, the Frogtown Neighborhood Association gathered area residents to discuss ways to save homes rather than tear them down. Outgoing Executive Director, Tait Danielson, expressed it best when he talked about the historic value of Frogtown and many of its houses. These may be working class homes but “they have architectural features that are unique and deserve to be saved”. A study by Historic Saint Paul identified a number of properties that met their criteria as historically significant.

Danielson noted a number of problems that made re-use difficult including small kitchens, small and inadequate bathrooms and small

closets. Re-aligning the interior could help but that would create smaller rooms in order to gain space in others. Additions are prohibitive given that the final investment would be more than the value of the completed property.

Creating an historic district has its own set of problems including the time it would take to do so and then establish the guidelines. Further, those guidelines would require review and approval of every permit and could add additional costs to improvements. For instance, vinyl windows would likely not be an option even though they work well.

The group spent some time discussing what they would like to see preserved including architectural trim, inside and out, built in buffets and other special features and basements. At the same time, 2-car garages, updated heating systems and air conditioning were very important.

The community expressed concern that they were slowly losing the very fabric of the community and will continue to meet on this issue. Frogtown Neighborhood Association has started a smaller group to investigate the formation of a new housing re-development initiative called Preserve Frogtown.

For its part, Ramsey County has developed the Reuse, Recycle & Renovate for Reinvestment (4R) Program for tax-forfeited properties. Under this program any properties that can be saved will be cleaned up and repaired for public auction. Those that can't be saved will be picked apart and all items that can be recycled or salvaged will be taken out so as small amount as possible will be taken to the landfill.

Finally, Tait Danielson announced that he was leaving the organization to move to Florida where his wife has taken a new job with her employer. He will surely be missed and new Director, Caty Royce, will have her hands full.

How Can My Taxes Go Up when My value Goes Down?

2013 property tax notices went out recently and many people were surprised to see that the value of their property went down or stayed the same

and their taxes went up, some significantly. The answer is not simple and it is made more complicated by Minnesota's complex property tax system. To achieve a property's final tax figure a number of things have to happen:

- 1) Each taxing jurisdiction(city, county, school district and other entities) establishes their budget;
- 2) The jurisdictions then notify the county the total amount of tax to be levied for the following year;
- 3) County staff adds all of the amounts up taking into account the area that will be taxed. For instance a home in a city will have a county tax, a city tax, a school district tax, and a tax from minor jurisdictions such as the Mosquito Control Board. But these could be different based on the location of the property because some cities have different school districts.
- 4) Once the total amount in a community is established then the cumulative taxes are divided by the number of properties, the value of those properties and the tax rate set by the state legislature is applied.

If some properties go up in value and yours goes down you would expect a lower tax. If all properties go down in value you would expect your tax to stay the same. But if high valued properties go down in value and yours stays the same your tax will go up. When some go up and some go down at different rates things get really complicated and it takes computers to do the calculations.

The tax assessor determines the value of each property by reviewing them and comparing them to similar properties in the area. It is far from an exact science but assessors, by state law, must be within 90 and 105% of the true value – a value that is only determined when a property is sold. Ramsey County assessors average about 96.5% for most property classes. A good source of information on property taxes comes from the Minnesota Center for Fiscal Excellence and can be found at <http://www.fiscalexcellence.org/our-studies/uypt-2012-edition-final.pdf>

By the way, if you dispute the value of your property you can request a meeting with the

assessor who will review all of his data with you, tour the property check comparables and any recent information you provide such as a bank-required appraisal.

Senior citizens can apply for a tax deferral for homesteaded property if they meet certain qualifications. The tax is deferred, not forgiven, and must be repaid when the home is sold, transferred or if circumstances change such as gaining an inheritance or maybe winning a lottery. Forms are available from The Minnesota department of revenue or from their website:

[http://www.revenue.state.mn.us/individuals/prop_tax_refund/Pages/Senior Citizens Property Tax Deferral Program.aspx](http://www.revenue.state.mn.us/individuals/prop_tax_refund/Pages/Senior_Citizens_Property_Tax_Deferral_Program.aspx)

Spring Hours Set For Compost Sites

Last fall we reported that the mild fall weather and lack of snow made it possible for Ramsey County to keep its yard waste sites open until November 30th. Ironically, the late spring requires the county to keep them closed much later than usual. Summer hours should go in effect by about April 15th, two weeks later than normal. The summer hours are as follows:

Monday, Wednesday & Friday - 11:00 to 7:00
Tuesdays & Thursdays - Closed
Saturdays – 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.
Sundays – 11:00A.M. to 5:00 P.M.

Closed: Memorial Day – May 27th;
 Independence Day – July 4th;
 Labor Day – September 2nd

It's hard to believe but it has been more than 30 years since the ban on burning leaves or disposal of leaves and grass clippings with the trash was adopted and implemented. The first yard waste sites (Totem Town, Eastside, Pleasant Avenue, Midway, Arden Hills, Mounds View) opened in 1983. That means a whole generation has never experienced piles of leaves raked and burned at the end of the season. Nor the choking smoke and haze lingering over the city every fall.

The yard waste site has since been expanded thanks to Commissioner Janice Rettman and some District 3 residents who brought brush and tree branches, including Christmas trees, into the program. The woody material is ground up and used to create hot water and electrical energy at the St. Paul District Energy Plant.

District Council News And Schedules

DISTRICT 5 (651-774-5234)

www.paynephallen.org

Board of Directors
4th Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
@ SPPD Eastern District
722 Payne Avenue

DISTRICT 6 (651-488-4485)

www.district6stpaul.org

Board of Directors
1st Monday, 6:30 p.m.
@ North Dale Rec Center
1414 St. Albans Street

DISTRICT 7 (651-298-5068)

<http://www.frogtownmn.org/>

Board of Directors Meeting
2nd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
@ West Minnehaha Rec Center

DISTRICT 8 (651-228-1855)

www.summit-u.com/

Board of Directors Meeting
4th Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.
@ St. Albans Community Room
665 Selby Avenue

DISTRICT 10 (651-644-3889)

<http://www.district10comopark.org/>

Board of Directors Meeting
3rd Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.
@ Como Park Historic Street Car Station
1224 N. Lexington Parkway

DISTRICT 11 (651-646-1986)

www.hamlinemidwaycoalition.org

Board of Directors Meeting
3rd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
Hamline Library
@ 1558 West Minnehaha Avenue

DISTRICT 12 (651-649-5992)

<http://sapcc.org/>

Board of Directors Meeting
2nd Thursday, 7:00 p.m.
@ 890 Cromwell Avenue

DISTRICT 13 (651-645-6887)

<http://www.unionparkdc.org/>

Board of Directors Meeting
1st Wednesday, 7:00 p.m.
@ SPPD Western District Station
389 N. Hamline Avenue

CITY OF FALCON HEIGHTS (651-792-7600)

www.ci.falcon-heights.mn.us

City Council Meetings ; 2nd and 4th Wednesdays, 7:00 p.m. @ Falcon Heights City Hall
2077 W. Larpenter Avenue