

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT

Winter 2013-14

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.

No Smoking Policy Causes Discussion

On Tuesday March 18 the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners discussed a possible new policy that could prohibit smoking in licensed foster homes. As proposed by Commissioner Carter, smoking would be prohibited in a foster home or a vehicle when a foster child was in the home or vehicle. Commissioner Janice Rettman asked a number of questions about the specific language and the implementation in order to get clarification. Staff identified some of their own concerns about the language. For instance, issues arise where long-time foster homes are now faced with a new directive that changes the way people live in their own homes.

And then there is the penalty/no penalty matter. Some commissioners believed that the policy would be implemented without a penalty for caregivers but the language made it clear that children would or could be removed and placed in another home. This would create a financial loss immediately and in the long term as staff may be reluctant to use a provider who is a

family member or a long-term foster parent found to be in violation.

The non-smoking policy could also have a direct impact the county's efforts to place children in homes of relatives rather than with a non-family foster parent.

There is also a matter of enforcement: who will do the inspections? Will they be done with notice? Will sanctions be made on direct observation? Hearsay? And what is the appeal process?

In the end, the policy was revised to give the Human Services Department the ability to administer the new policy yet the flexibility to do what is best for each child in placement.

While a strong supporter of protecting individual rights to smoke, Rettman also recognized the need to protect children from second hand smoke yet keep them in a loving, caring environment. The "kinship" policy is important as is the right of foster care givers to have an appeal process when needed.

The policy was amended to address the concerns then adopted on a 7-0 vote.

Truth-In-Taxation Hearing Held

On Monday, November 25th the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners held its annual public hearing on the proposed 2014 budget and the property tax levy that will help pay for it. About 75 residents attended the meeting and 16 spoke. Some thanked the County Board for demanding quality services from staff and service contactors both in terms of financial support and for having responsive, concerned professional staff.

Others spoke about their particular situation and rising property taxes with no end in sight. As a whole, residential property taxes have been going down in value in recent years and rental properties have been going up. Some of this can be attributed to higher rents as the demand for units increases, some of that which could be attributed to mortgage foreclosures and to construction of new rental units which had slowed considerably when more and more people were buying homes. There is a delay between the time that demand increases and new units can be built.

In some cases residential property values – and taxes – have gone up but the reasons are usually unique to a specific property. Some were re-assessed and found to be undervalued, some have seen improvements, some were recently purchased at a higher value than estimated by the assessor and some happened to be in a neighborhood small that is on the rise or becoming more desirable.

In addition to the public hearing, several county staff from each department were available to discuss their activities and planned projects for 2014. Staff from Property Records and Revenue was also available to meet with individual property owners to discuss their particular situation.

If you have questions about your assessed value now is a good time to get your questions answered and make sure the information in the county records is accurate. And if you bought the property in 2013 make sure the amount you paid is reflected.

If you would like one you can also make arrangements for an assessor to do a full review of your property. If you have a recent appraisal such as that required for a mortgage have a copy for the appraiser. And should you request an assessor remember that any improvements not reflected in county records could raise your value.

Tax Levy Approved

On December 17th the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners approved the two-year, 2014-2015 budget and spending plans. For 2014 the plan calls for \$603,507,855 in spending which is 2.5% (\$14,834,793) more than 2013. For 2015 the plan calls for \$611,197,860 in spending or 1.3% (\$7,690,005) more than 2014. To pay for this the Board approved a 2014 tax levy of \$276,538,351 which is equal to the 2013 property tax levy (a 0% increase). The difference in spending will come from additional state and federal funds plus an increase in fees for some activities and services.

The 2015 levy will not be set until next December and that will be based on many factors such as the loss or gain of federal or state dollars. This is the first time in at least 20 years that there will not be an increase in back-to-back levies.

The county uses a two-year budget process in which it does a thorough review in the year the budget is adopted and then makes adjustments as needed for the second year. However, under state law it can only approve a levy in the year before it is to be implemented which is why the 2015 levy will not be approved until next year. This still allows for multi-year budget planning and adoption but also gives property owners some forewarning about the levy for year two.

The new \$3.8 million wheelage tax adopted earlier this year is for a specific purpose (roads and bridges) and is not part of the levy. That tax is paid when you license your vehicle. No vehicle? No tax.

The total levy includes \$10,610,387 for libraries that are assessed in suburban communities only. The city of Saint Paul has its own library fund and special levy.

The budget also includes \$59,954,274 in spending for capital improvements such as roads, bridges, building repairs and other improvements or technology equipment.

Over the next two years the county workforce will be reduced by 15 positions, primarily through attrition, with most of those support or administrative positions. In this way county services will not be reduced and most of the reductions will occur through retirements or advancement of the current staff.

The expected \$603,507,855 in total revenue for 2014 breaks down as follows:

Property taxes	45.0 %
Intergovernmental revenue	27.7 %
Charges for service & fees	19.1 %
Use of money, property & sales	4.7 %
Other revenue and taxes	2.8 %
Use of fund balance	0.7 %

The proposed budget included a number of items Commissioner Janice Rettman has been pushing for a number of years including building up the reserve fund for retiree benefits.

Regional Rail Levy Approved

In separate action on December 17th the Commissioners, acting as the Regional Rail Authority, approved a tax levy of \$19,053,307 which is a 4.4% decrease from 2014 required by state statutory levy limits. This levy was approved as proposed in September and is in addition to the county levy. Funds are used to support county-wide transit activities including financing and operation of the refurbished Union Depot in Saint Paul.

No County HRA Levy

As in the past, the Ramsey County Housing and Redevelopment Authority will not levy a property tax even though they have the authority to do so. Many of the county's cities have their own HRA and some of them already initiate a tax to support their work of providing housing and jobs. The work of the Ramsey County HRA, led by Chair Janice Rettman, is supported through state and federal grants and fees for services yet has been successful in providing

support for cleaning up brownfields for new jobs, initiating and monitoring grants and loans and developing housing for veterans.

Tax Forfeited Property Auction

On Friday, December 6th the Tax-Forfeited Lands section of Ramsey County held an auction for 30 properties that had been forfeited to the state for failure to pay property taxes. Under state law each county is responsible for maintaining tax-forfeited properties and disposing of them in a manner that achieves the highest value for the taxing jurisdictions. After expenses are deducted the remaining proceeds are then distributed on a pro-rated basis to each of the jurisdictions that are owed taxes.

Cities may acquire some properties directly if they have a specific plan for the parcel that can be implemented quickly. A county may choose not to grant the local request if required conditions are not met and auction it off to the highest bidder instead.

Property owners do have the right to re-purchase the property for the amount owed in taxes and assessments if (1) they are the owner at the time of forfeiture; or (2) they are the property owner's heirs or legal representatives; or (3) a person or agency who has been granted the right to pay taxes as directed by state statute or by a mortgage or other agreement. Any other party with a legal interest in the property who does not have the statutory or contractual right to pay the property taxes is not authorized to repurchase but may bid at auction.

Homestead property may be repurchased anytime before it is sold by the county or conveyed to a third party such as a city. Non-homestead property may be repurchased anytime within one year from the date of forfeiture, providing it has not already been sold or conveyed. The county is not required to wait one year before selling or conveying a parcel.

The current sale included 27 vacant parcels and 3 residential properties. The vacant parcels varied in size and shape from under 2,000 square feet to over 2 acres. Some may be too small to build on and some are landlocked requiring the purchase of an easement to access them. Many

would make great side yards for abutting properties.

Included were two single-family homes and one duplex that had been renovated through the county's 4-R program. Proposed by Commissioner Janice Rettman and initiated in 2010, the Reuse, Recycle, and Renovate for Reinvestment (4-R) program identifies forfeited properties that have potential to achieve a higher sale price, preserve the tax base in the city it is located in or either preserve or help rebuild neighborhoods under stress. The county works hard to save architectural features that add to the value and fit in with the neighboring properties.

The goal of the 4R Program is to reuse or recycle at least 75% of the materials in the building. If possible, any items that are salvageable are removed and given a new life. Other materials, such as asphalt shingles, are recycled. To date, 8 properties have been renovated with 4 more being worked on this year. Sixteen structures have been removed and recycled with three more on the current list.

The program is funded primarily with a loan from the county's solid waste fund. As proceeds permit, they will be paid back to the CEC fund.

As for the auction, there are a number of rules that apply and sale prices begin at the appraised value set by the county. Renovated houses were available for preview in mid-November.

Rettman stated that "These auctions are unique opportunities for just about anyone to become a property owner in the county. The auction process allows us to get properties back on the tax rolls and still gives anyone, regardless of race, income or background, an equal chance. Plus bank financing is not a necessity. This is a great equalizer for people who want to own a home."

Information on the next auction or open houses can be found online at <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/prr/tfl/auctioninfo.htm>

County Board Appoints New Chair

On Tuesday, January 7 the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners held their annual organizational meeting appointing members to various boards, committees and outside committees. As expected, Commissioner Jim McDonough and Commissioner Raphael Ortega traded chairs. McDonough (District 6) was elected chair of the County Board and Ortega (District 2) was elected chair of the Regional Rail Authority. Both have served in these positions in the past.

There were few other changes as Janice Rettman repeats as vice-chair of the County Board as was re-appointed to the Housing and Redevelopment Authority. Victoria Reinhardt will continue as chair of the Budget Committee, Blake Huffman will serve as HRA vice-chair and Toni Carter was elected HRA secretary.

In closing out his term Ortega noted that the county is now actively taking steps to try to build income equity for residents and work to disperse rather than concentrate poverty. McDonough pledged to continue those goals as well as work with other east-metro counties so that all communities benefit and prosper from public investment.

For the HRA, Rettman pointed out that despite a setback in 2012, the county was successful in getting state legislative approval for the Environmental Response Fund (ERF) to help clean up polluted sites for job creation. It may take several months to build up the fund but there is a need and a demand for those dollars throughout the county. The program requires that funds be divided equally between the city of Saint Paul and the remainder of the county although an imbalance is often the case depending on available funds and timing.

In other action, a contract was awarded to Lillie Suburban Newspapers to serve as the official newspaper for public notices and publications.

Quick Updates

Ramsey County Human Services Director

Monty Martin has notified the County Manager that he will be retiring effective March 31, 2014. Mr. Martin has served the County with distinction for more than 30 years.

County Attorney John Choi introduced prevailing wage ordinance and contract compliance ordinances for Board consideration. The first requires that prevailing wages be paid to workers on construction projects greater than \$25,000. The second allows the county to take action or establish conditions for those businesses that fail to comply with contract rules. The ordinances were approved unanimously in December and take effect in March. These are not new policies but codify the past practices of the county established by the Commissioners a number of years ago.

Ramsey County Parks & Recreation Director

Greg Mack has notified the Manager that he will be retiring from his position effective April 30, 2014. Mr. Mack joined the County in 1988 and may have been in the position long enough to qualify as the longest serving department director in Ramsey County history.

Dai Thao was elected in November to represent Ward 1 on the Saint Paul City Council. This being a special election to fill a vacant seat, he will need to run again in the regular election in 2015 for the four-year term.

The new **Central Corridor LRT Green Line** is scheduled to begin its operating schedule on June 14. In addition to the 10:00 A.M. ribbon cutting ceremony plans are underway for “first train” celebrations at seven stations including Western, Victoria, Hamline and Raymond in Saint Paul. All rides will be free on that day.

Final agreements have been completed but the cold weather has delayed this year’s long awaited return of **AMTRAK’s passenger trains** to the Union Depot in Saint Paul. In its heyday nearly 300 trains and 20,000 passengers went through the station on a daily basis. Train service there ended in 1971. Ramsey County spent \$243 million from many sources providing 4400 jobs in rebuilding the historic station.

Megabus also makes a stop at the Union Depot providing daily service to Madison, Milwaukee and Chicago. A number of departing times are available all for less than \$30.

Winter Sports Facility Unresolved

Last year we reported that the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners voted 6-1 (Janice Rettman, opposed) directing staff to make an offer to purchase the Vadnais Heights Sports Center. The facility, which includes two hockey rinks, a domed field, a running track, locker rooms, a concession area and office space, is in bankruptcy and the city of Vadnais Heights took steps to rid itself of the financial obligations. That resulted in a significant lowering of the city’s long-term rating on lease revenue bonds by national bond-rating agency Standard and Poor’s.

The future of the facility is a complicated web. It is in bankruptcy and the court-appointed trustee and a judge will be a part of the final decision on its future. All seem to agree that the sale will be significantly lower than the \$26 million cost of construction but the bondholders are working to get back at least part of their original investment.

The ownership group, Community Facility Partners, selected a \$13 million bid from Northern Educate sports-training academy that provides on-line education with intense training in selected sports. But Northern Educate, who already leases space and ice time at the center, failed to deliver a letter of intent to purchase by the required date. As a result, the trustee can request new bids or enter into talks with other bidders, including Ramsey County. The county had previously offered \$10.6 million to buy the four year old facility.

According to the city’s bond consultant, Kathy Aho, who also serves as the county’s consultant, the facility could expect to generate revenues between \$1.6 million and \$2.2 million for 2013 and 2014 while maintaining annual costs of about \$2.8 million. Aho noted that one company that had been in talks with the city believed revenues could reach \$2.5 million by 2015 which still leaves a significant deficit

Meanwhile, Ramsey County Parks and Recreation Department continues to have problems filling up its own nine ice arenas as new ones are constructed in suburban areas and participation in hockey declines. Biff Adams Arena in Frogtown is under a longer-term lease with the Saint Paul Curling Club and has seen renovations that make it unusable for hockey. The Pleasant Avenue Arena is primarily used by a figure skating club. Given the lack of demand for ice time, one question for the county remains to be what ice arena or arenas will be closed if the proposed purchase moves forward?

TCAAP Site Update

Deconstruction of buildings and remediation of the 397 acres of polluted land in Arden Hills known as the TCAAP (Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant) is well under way but Ramsey County, new owner of the site, continues to add money to get the property in a clean, salable condition.

On Tuesday, February 4th the Board approved a contract with the Saint Paul Port Authority to act as the sale agent and to begin looking for buyers.

Even though she has a strong working relationship with the Port Authority Commissioner Janice Rettman voted against the sale contract because there was no limit on the amount that could be billed at an average rate of \$175 per hour and because there is no condition that buyers be required to create new, living-wage jobs. Heather Worthington, Assistant County Manager, stated that in the coming months the Port Authority would work with the county to “develop a set of policies and procedures for the sale of the property”. That plan would include the county’s principles on job creation and living-wage jobs. Rettman also remains concerned that there is a lingering possibility that a portion of the site could become a tax increment district in which property taxes would revert to the developer not the city and county for up to 30 years.

As to funding the on-going costs, in 2011 the county approved \$1 million from its contingency fund for the TCAAP, in 2012 the Board added \$2 million and on February 10th of this year another \$1.7 million. This is in addition to the

\$28 million to purchase the property and the \$2 million the county spent in its unsuccessful bid to woo the Minnesota Vikings. As in the past, Rettman again voted against this year’s proposed \$1.7 million allocation stating that “To me, that sort of sets TCAAP as an ongoing part of the county’s budget.” County Manager Julie Kleinschmidt stated that it was true that the contingency fund would never be paid back and that it could be 15 years or more before that county actually sees some payback from its investment.

Trail Issue Also Remains Unresolved

Ramsey County and several other officials, including Commissioner Janice Rettman, continue to meet with Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT) to resolve the trail along I-35E on the east side of Saint Paul. An agreement has yet to be reached between the county and the (MNDOT) but negotiations continue in the hopes that it will be resolved by the 2014 construction season.

At this point it is likely that the Department of Natural Resources’ (DNR) trail bridge over 35E near Arlington, actually an old railroad bridge that has historic roots to the eastside community, will be removed by MNDOT as part of the reconstruction of the freeway and the addition of a new MNPASS lane. MNDOT still has not made any commitments as it tries to avoid paying for a path that it is required to replace under federal regulations.

In July of last year the Board of Commissioners adopted a resolution approving a cooperative agreement with MNDOT that allows construction of the MnPASS lane and cost participation (i.e. county dollars) for reconstruction and maintenance of the Larpenter Avenue interchange on the condition that MNDOT works to resolve the trail or “non-motorized transportation connections, issues .

What is known is that the cost to construct the proposed trail is significantly less than MNDOT originally stated and that construction issues are not impediments at all. It is also now known that a suggested motor vehicle-bicycle-pedestrian “shareway” on Westminster Street is not feasible

plus the cost hasn't been analyzed and there are no funds available at this time for construction.

Commissioner Rettman and the Payne-Phalen community continue to push for the path and bridge which is required under federal rules for the replacement of public facilities. The DNR path was used for many years by residents as a way to get from the east side of the freeway to the west for work, shopping and recreational purposes and less as a recreational trail. Environmental justice requires a new one to replace the trail and bridge that was removed.

The I-35E project will cost about \$238 million including a new MnPass lane which is only available to multi-occupancy vehicles and individuals who pay a fee during peak hours.

2014 Elections

Candidates for public offices have already begun this year's election process talking to citizens and identifying supporters at precinct caucuses that were held on February 4th. Statewide, the Minnesota's 8 congressional district candidates are busy with a likely primary in the sixth district to replace the retiring Michelle Bachman. One senate seat is also up this year with a number of Republican candidates seeking to oust incumbent Al Franken.

At the state level, the constitutional offices of governor (Mark Dayton), secretary of state (Mark Ritchie), attorney general (Lori Swanson) and auditor (Rebecca Otto) are on the ballot. Dayton, Swanson and Otto are seeking re-election while Ritchie has announced he is not running. The lieutenant governor runs on the gubernatorial ticket with the governor but the current office holder, Yvonne Prettner Solon, will be stepping down.

At the local level, state house and some senate seats are up with a few worth watching. In Saint Paul, Michael Paymar is not seeking re-election and at least six DFL candidates are vying for the open seat. And four county commissioners are also up for re-election this year.

Jim McDonough (District 6), Rafael Ortega (District 5), Toni Carter (District 4) and Janice Rettman (District 3) are all seeking re-election. Three of the four commissioners represent

districts in the city of Saint Paul and the fourth, District 3 (**Janice Rettman**) also includes the city of Falcon Heights. The other three county commissioners who represent suburban communities will be up for re-election in 2016.

There are no city or school district elections in Ramsey County this year.

District Council News And Schedules

DISTRICT 5 (651-774-5234)

www.paynephalen.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 Emanuel Lutheran Church

301 Hatch 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.
@ Concordia University
Library Technology Center/ Room 215

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