

An Optimistic Look at the Future of County Libraries

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My mother always told me from adversity often comes opportunity. Regarding the Ramsey County Library system, we are planning to overcome adversity and seize the opportunity to add a branch library through an addition to the North Saint Paul Community Center.

The adversity, as everyone is aware, took place during last years State Budget cuts. Some leaders at the State went so far as to suggest that libraries are a "non-essential" service that local governments provide. I disagree. Free and open access to information is a fundamental building block of a democratic society. Our libraries provide that access and we cannot afford to take them for granted.

The State cuts hit local governments pretty hard, forcing layoffs and service reductions across the board. Services at the North Saint Paul branch library were suspended in June and the recommendation from the Library Board is to suspend services at the Arden Hills branch in January of next year. These moves do not equal a closure or abandonment of library services in those communities. The Ramsey County Board will be considering the Capital budget for the library system next month. We will be retiring old debts, and with the favorable interest rates right now, we have an opportunity to invest in the future of the system without raising taxes. The current proposal has money in it to build the new library in North Saint Paul as part of the Community Center as well as providing for the reconstruction needed in Arden Hills.

The design in North Saint Paul will take advantage of new technologies, efficiency of scale and is in a better location. It will allow us to run the new library at a reduced cost that will fit within our reduced budget. The location will also be more convenient for the citizens of North Saint Paul, because it will be closer to the other community activities. The plans for the North Saint Paul library are truly impressive and practical.

I remain optimistic about the future of community libraries in Suburban Ramsey County. While it is true that the smaller libraries do not match their bigger cousins in terms of circulation rates and other statistics, I believe they provide great social and economic benefits in terms of service to the community. I will continue to work hard with leaders from the City of North Saint Paul to insure that the suspension of services is for as short a period of time as possible.

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