

How does Ramsey County Work?

By Victoria Reinhardt

During the 1996 election I met many residents of Ramsey County District 7 who live in North St. Paul, Maplewood, White Bear Lake and St. Paul. One of the most common questions asked of me pertained to the role of County government, or perhaps, more to the point, "How does Ramsey County work?"

Ramsey County was established by the territorial government in 1849. At one point, it was, geographically speaking, the largest County in the State of Minnesota. Currently it has the distinction of being the smallest, most urbanized Minnesota County. The major responsibility of Ramsey County government in the mid-1800's was to record information such as land transactions, births, deaths and marriages. Today, with a population nearing 495,000 people many more services are provided to Ramsey County residents. Some of these services are due to County policy. However, most are mandated by the Federal and/or State government.

Now, back to the question of how the County works today. Ramsey County is divided into seven districts. Each district is represented by one County Commissioner. These seven commissioners, or the Board of Commissioners, are responsible for determining County policy and deciding how money should be raised and spent for the well being of Ramsey County residents. The day-to-day operations of the County are managed by the County Manager, who is hired by the Board of Commissioners. The County system itself is comprised of 24 departments staffed by 3500 employees and 3000 volunteers. These 24 departments can be assembled into five main service areas: 1) Human Services/Economic Assistance, 2) Public Safety and Justice, 3) Recreation, Cultural and Public Works, 4) Health Services and Solid Waste Management, 5) General Government and Other Functions. Ramsey County also has seven suburban libraries and provides educational outreach through the County Extension Service.

I realize that numbers and percentages can be boring, but when you are talking about a budget of almost \$404 million in 1997, it deserves our attention. Ramsey County property tax levies make up 37.5% of the total budget. Intergovernmental funding (e.g. funds from State and Federal Government) makes up 35.6% of the budget, while other revenue sources such as fines, service fees, child support /welfare payment recoveries account for the other 26.9% of the budget. It is important to realize that 76% , or approximately \$307 million, of the services provided by Ramsey County are mandated by the State or Federal Government. The breakdown of the 1997 budget is as follows:

1) Human Services / Economic Assistance 49.4%

- 2) Public Safety and Justice 23.1%
- 3) Recreation, Cultural and Public Works 4.9%
- 4) Health Services and Solid Waste Management 6.3%
- 5) General Government and other Functions 10.8%

Two other funding areas are:

Library Operations- 1.9%

Debt Service- 3.6%

Regardless of where the money comes from, County property taxes or the State or Federal Government, it is my responsibility as your Ramsey County Commissioner to:

- Listen to your concerns
- Prevent or resolve problems facing Ramsey County
- Ask the tough budget questions about the provision of services
- Determine the best and most cost-effective methods to provide high quality services, including a pilot project I am proposing for Programmatic rather than Departmental Budgeting around the issue of Juvenile Crime Prevention
- Work hard at the State and Federal levels to eliminate unfunded mandates, as well as assure maximum flexibility in providing services.