

Time to step back and assess the year

by Victoria Reinhardt

December is the month that I, like many people, step back and assess what kind of year it has been. The word that comes to mind to describe 1997 is "hectic." I have thoroughly enjoyed being a County commissioner and feel truly honored to be in a position to help lead Ramsey County into the 21st Century. With the majority of the Board members being newly elected in 1996, it has been a time of change at Ramsey County as there are many new ideas and directions. I want to take this opportunity to share some of the exciting things that happened in 1997 and cast some light on what is planned for next year.

A great example of the new thinking at Ramsey County is the pilot project for the outcome-based program-area budget in the area of juvenile crime prevention that I wrote about in the spring. This pilot project proposes a new way for government to look at budgets. It embraces private sector thinking by moving away from traditional departmental budgeting and directing dollars toward programs. This type of budgeting will accomplish three main goals. It will be more fiscally efficient, promote cooperation between departments, and provide a better way to compare outcomes to costs. Juvenile crime prevention was chosen for the pilot project because of the urgent need to prevent criminal behavior as early as possible. Community outreach and partnerships are a vital part of this project.

I am also proud of the way Ramsey County has dealt with the new responsibilities that we face during to federal welfare reform. I fought very hard to maintain Ramsey County's emergency shelter for families based on both moral and economic considerations. Welfare-to-work challenges have been met head-on. We have set up a private-public partnership to help deal with the many issues confronting us, such as job training, child care and transportation. I have also been working hard to get Ramsey County more active with the business community in my district. Ramsey County joined the White Bear Area and Suburban Chambers of Commerce, as well as the White Bear Avenue Business Association and the North Saint Paul Business Association. A healthy business community will be key to creating the necessary new jobs. Changes in welfare will prove to have many challenges in the coming year as well. We will continue to be as flexible and creative with our solutions as we have been in 1997.

The real pleasure in being a commissioner comes when I can take an active role in making our lives in Ramsey County better – whether by helping people resolve problems with Ramsey County or by guiding them to the right place for help. Constituent service is the overriding reason for all government and I will never shrink away from it. When you have questions, concerns, or complaints, you should know

that my office is open to help you. Examples of this are Ramsey County's support of the Artrain when it visited White Bear Lake; the alternations made to the Battle Creek Regional Park water play area; and the leadership of the County Board in obtaining a Presidential Disaster Declaration for Ramsey County for the July 1997 rainstorms. In all aspects of Ramsey County services, your input is important.

Other accomplishments at Ramsey County include: moving into the final outcome and evaluation stage of the Ramsey County Strategic Plan that involved so many county residents; reducing the proposed 1998 budget and property tax levy; progressing on the needed expansion of the Juvenile Detention Center and the siting of the Adult Detention Center (ADC); making mental health services more accessible to residents; establishing an accounts receivable program at Ramsey County that will help recoup funds due to the county; and holding Board meetings, including Truth-In-Taxation hearings in suburban Ramsey County.

Glancing ahead to next year, I am looking forward to continuing to advocate for a change from the Metropolitan Council structure to a Council of Governments (COG) consisting of elected local officials. I proposed this legislative position to Ramsey County and it was ultimately adopted by the Association of Minnesota Counties. How a COG would serve our region and what it would look like will be the subject of a future article. A new governance structure is also being explored for solid waste management in the seven-county metro area. Implementation of efforts begun in 1997, like the ADC, outcome-based program-area budgeting for juvenile crime prevention, and the Strategic Plan, will be eagerly pursued. As stated previously, the challenges regarding welfare reform will be ongoing. Finally, seeking out innovative ways to provide the highest quality services to you in the most economical and efficient way possible will remain my highest priority. I look forward to working in partnership with you to achieve this goal.

Have a joyous holiday season and a happy new year!