

OPINION

Contributions welcome to editor@plamerican.com, (952) 345-6378

'Get busy' on a vision for Prior Lake

How do you pay for a \$50 million sewer and water treatment project when there is no sewage? If you're the city of East Bethel, you raise property taxes or go hat in hand to the state and try to get a bailout.

The other option is to default on the bonds and ruin your credit rating forever. It's what psychologists call an avoidance-avoidance conflict — made worse, in this case, because the angst is self-inflicted.

East Bethel is a sprawling suburban community of 11,000 that's dispersed across the great Anoka Sand Plain. It has no major retail or commercial centers, not even a grocery store or a restaurant and no apparent, or immediate, need for urban infrastructure. But when a consultant presented a market study and a set of rosy Met Council growth projections, policymakers became convinced that development and tax riches would come their way if the city spent big money on sewer and water improvements. A 2030 vision statement predicted a doubling of the city's population to 25,000 along with a new city center, stores and condominiums.

Today, that city has its treatment plants, but the projected growth fizzled. It will need a minimum of 6,500 new sewer hookups to start paying off the debt. To date, it has 60. All the players on the city council and its city administrator, who signed off on this boondoggle, are gone, given the boot by voters, but residents are stuck with a 15-percent bump in their 2014 property taxes to cover the first payment on bonds that are coming due.

It's a cautionary tale for Prior Lake. We have some at City Hall, along with developers and special interests, that had a whiff of prosperity before the Great Recession and, like Ham Lake, are willing to gamble on development schemes to promote a level of growth that's inconsistent with Prior Lake's small-town feel and its quality of life. They envision a build-out and foresee a population of 45,000 to 50,000 people, 20,000 more than Richfield's today.

Ask yourself: Is Richfield a small town? Does the intersection of 66th and Lyndale, Richfield's "downtown," feel like a small town to you? Moreover, who will pay for the roads, sewer and water hookups and infrastructure improvements that will be needed to support this level of growth? Should it be developers through impact fees, or individual property owners? And what about noise, traffic congestion and environmental degradation? Prior and Spring lakes are already under pressure. Will they improve with another 25,000 people? Is all of this sustainable? Is it where you want to live?

Fortunately, none of this may be in the cards. Previous growth projections have been far off the mark, and those that are currently bantered about are simply not credible. The fact is that exurban growth has slowed, which is all to the good. Aging baby boomers are moving back to the cities, and young professionals — increasingly sensitive to sprawled development — are opting for an urban setting and the cultural amenities and accessibility to transit that come with it.



John DIERS

COMMUNITY COLUMNIST

Take a trip down University Avenue between the U of M and the state Capitol for a look at the changes brought about by the Green Line, which opens on June 14. University Avenue, along with downtown Minneapolis and the Lowertown Historic District in St. Paul, are among the fastest-growing areas in the Twin Cities. Minneapolis wants to add density and 100,000 people. By every indication it probably will, with many of them coming from the metro fringe.

Economists and demographers tell us that communities like Prior Lake will keep attracting young families and grow, but at a much slower pace. It's a trend that's already underway. The downside comes if city officials obligate the city and mortgage its future to pursue a level of growth and development that is neither desirable nor likely to happen.

We saw some of this with the failed proposal to relocate County Road 21, the million-dollar Arcadia extension and the follow-on plan to push it through to Highway 13. It continues with \$70,000 "welcome" signs, \$8,000 streetlights, consultants, economic development studies and a pricey vision for downtown that makes no economic sense, except to the promoters and developers who profit from it. Rather, what's needed is a thoughtful set of measured goals that preserve the environment and the quality of life together with investments and improvements that accommodate a level of growth that's consistent with these goals.

It all comes down to deciding what Prior Lake wants to be. It hasn't yet, but the determination and the responsibility, as well as the consequences that come with it, belong to the community, not the staff at City Hall, developers, special interests or those elected officials who advocate for them. They have their agenda and a vision for Prior Lake that may not coincide with the long-term interests of the greater community.

I'm reminded of a quote that's been attributed to H.L. Mencken: "In a democracy the people get the government they deserve."

Give these issues some thought. Then talk with your friends and neighbors. Whatever your views, agree or not, make them known. Above all, get involved. There's a community vision workshop on April 22, and, of course, there's the election in November. As my grandmother used to say, "get busy."

John Diers is a Prior Lake resident who spent 40 years working in the transit industry and author of "Twin Cities by Trolley: The Streetcar Era in Minneapolis and St. Paul" and "St. Paul Union Depot." To submit questions or topics for Diers, email editor@plamerican.com.



DAVE GRANLUND © www.davegranlund.com

COMMENTARY

What is the Ferric Chloride Facility?

BY MEGHAN LITSEY

Just Southwest of Spring Lake sits a small yellow building that guards a particular wetland along Highway 13. Many local residents may not know that this facility and the system connected to it help to clean water before it flows into Spring Lake.

This mystery site is called the Highway 13 Ferric Chloride Facility, and it has been helping to reduce pollutant levels in Spring Lake for almost 15 years.

The Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District originally installed the Ferric Chloride Facility in 1998. Last year, the district finished updating the facility to meet new Minnesota Pollution Control Agency requirements, and increased the capacity of the system to treat water flowing through the area. Some of the key improvements to the system included upgrades to the line that adds the ferric chloride solution to the water and a bypass that will allow the system to continue to remove phosphorus when a lot of water is trying to move through the wetland to Spring Lake.

In excess

Just one pound of phosphorus can produce 500 pounds of algae.

Excess water, also known as runoff, from melting snow and rainwater in this area generally flows from the southwest to the northeast as it funnels through the County Ditch 13 system toward Spring Lake. As this runoff flows through the Ferric Chloride system, the facility injects liquid ferric chloride into the water at a controlled rate in a specially built pond area called a desiltation pond. Here, the ferric chloride chemical attaches to the phosphorus in the water, then forms a solid material and falls to the bottom of the pond. This process "cleans" the water by removing phosphorus as it continues to flow into Spring Lake.

Removing phosphorus from the water before it reaches Spring Lake is important because Spring Lake already has too much phosphorus — a nutrient that is important for animal and

plant life in lake ecosystems, but that can cause a chain reaction of undesirable events in excess amounts.

If there is an excessive amount of phosphorus available in the water, this pollutant can promote harmful algal blooms that cause fish kills and interfere with swimming, fishing and boating.

Recent testing has shown that the Ferric Chloride Facility provides an estimated removal of 35 percent of the total phosphorus coming from the County Ditch 13 system. This essentially prevents an average of more than 500 pounds of phosphorus from entering Spring Lake each year. And just one pound of phosphorus can produce 500 pounds of algae.

The system is expected to be active this spring, and will continue to remove phosphorus from the water before it enters Spring Lake. To learn more about the Ferric Chloride Facility or other Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District projects, visit www.plslwd.org.

Meghan Litsey is the outreach specialist with the Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District.

LETTERS

CITY HALL

City too focused on what's 'pretty'

Our City Hall made the metro regional news recently, in a Feb. 12 two-page story, "The cost of pretty lights." The Star Tribune informed us that City Hall is spending up to \$8,000 per street lamp, apparently for the sole purpose of making them "pretty." I went from disbelief to anger. Those are my tax dollars that the city manager is spending, none for my benefit.

I wouldn't be happy with a light bulb hanging from a cord, but the article made it clear that there are high-quality functional street lamps available for thousands of dollars less. This decision sounds of the same mentality that decided we needed to spend \$100,000 for two "welcome to downtown" monuments, when we all know how to get to downtown.

Mayor Hedberg's article in last Saturday's Prior Lake American helps to clarify City Hall's agenda. While most of us are thinking about how to pay next month's bills, the city manager, mayor and two supporters on the council are dreaming about "rooftop restaurants, theatres, art

venues" and the like for downtown. They apparently believe "pretty" street lights and "welcome to downtown" monuments are just starters.

The mayor seems to imply this is City Hall's plan for preparing for a population explosion that he seems to be excited about. It's not clear to me how pretty lights are going to offset issues of water supply, overuse of our lake and other effects of overpopulation.

Annette Thompson
Prior Lake

Ondich won't sell out to win

I am writing to declare I have no intention to run for state representative in District 55B. I will not seek any party's endorsement and will not file to run in any primary this May.

I enjoyed the two runs for state Legislature I had in 2010 and 2012. I thank the voters who voted for me in those primaries. I also thank Matt Christensen and Kathy Busch for talking with me and getting to know them. I no longer consider myself a DFLer. I now consider myself an independent.

Would I ever run again for a public office? Maybe. I would consider a local office like city council or school

board. Why would I not run for a state legislative office indefinitely? My experience has shown me the office of state representative and state senator is influenced by special-interest groups like Education Minnesota, political party control like endorsement conventions run by partisan politics and raising tens of thousands of dollars.

I found the only way to win a race for that office made me feel like I had to sell out my personal principles and deviate from the changes I want to propose. I refused to do that. I am glad I lost those primaries and gained the experience, instead of selling out to win those primary and/or general election races. I believe an elected official is a public servant that serves the best interest of his or her constituents [rather than] the ideology, wealth or stature of the official or their constituents.

I encourage more citizens to participate in their local government. We need to people to stand up to make changes that will better their communities and the people around them by running for local offices. We need more public servants, not political pawns for political parties and special-interest groups.

Josh D. Ondich
Prior Lake

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