



# MAYOR'S COLUMN

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Release Date: Friday, Nov. 25

## Second term challenges and opportunities



Six weeks ago, I wrote a letter to the editor thanking Prior Lake voters for the trust they placed in me when they elected me mayor in 2001, and in advance for their support in this year's general election. Now that the votes have been counted and the dust has settled, I would like to offer a few postscripts to the election and the issues that emerged on the campaign trail.

First and foremost, thank you. It is truly a wonderful privilege to serve as your mayor, and I look forward to the challenges that we will face, the relationships we will build, and the opportunities we will seize during the next four years.

I remain very proud of the things we have accomplished to this point, working hand in hand with the 2030 Vision and Strategic Plan guiding our every step.

But even though I was unopposed, I maintained during the campaign that we needed to pay close attention to what was being said in letters to the editor, in forums, and on the streets to ensure that we were being inclusive and hearing all of the issues.

One issue heard repeatedly was the need to effectively manage the growth of our city. It's not our objective, but the reality is that our community is projected to grow to a population of 40,000 to 45,000 by build-out in 2030. That projection would be reached by averaging just 280 building permits a year, using the assumption of 2.8 people per household.

To put that in perspective, let's take a look at recent building trends in Prior Lake. Permitting activity has dropped steadily every year since topping out at 813 in 2002. For this year, we are projecting less than 200 residential building permits.

I am proud of what our current council has done to effectively manage growth, but if we look at the big picture, it's clear that we must do even more to preserve open spaces and natural areas and to further limit densities in our city.

In recognition of this, I will propose shortly after the first of the year that we broaden and expand the responsibilities of our various advisory committees in an attempt to better deal with these key issues and others. One key discussion point might be whether our existing Lake Advisory Committee (LAC) should become a lake and open space advisory committee. Another might be whether our Parks Advisory Committee might be expanded to a parks, arts, athletics and recreation advisory committee. And, whether the number of participants on each of these committees might be expanded to provide a basis for broader input from our community.

Economic development was another popular topic on the campaign trail. We have done a much better job in the past few years of retaining existing businesses. And if you drive along our major highways like Highway 13 or County Road 21, visit downtown or follow the new Village Lake Drive, you'll notice many new businesses that were not a part of our community a few years ago.

But much more work still must be done, and with this in mind, we recently hired a new economic development director. Paul Snook, who starts work on Dec. 1, spent eight years (1997 to 2004) as Shakopee's economic development director. We look forward to significant leadership from him. One of the first things we will be asking him to entertain is the formation of an economic development advisory committee consisting of Prior Lake business owners

and Prior Lake residents who own businesses elsewhere. Their charge will be to provide input on a number of economic development issues, including a greater focus on job creation.

We also must do a better job communicating with our public, a point driven home by council member-elect Steve Millar repeatedly during the campaign. In the last three years, we've done some tremendous things to enhance all of our communications vehicles like the Wavelength, the city Web site, e-mail distributions, cable television programming, etc. But we must find ways to create more interactive communication with residents. That will be a challenge for our new council, and one we will focus on immediately after Jan. 1.

Finally, a word or two on fiscal responsibility. There is a perception that we have had significant tax increases in our community. The fact is that over the last three years, the impact of the city's property tax has averaged 2.7 percent – less than the rate of inflation.

Our tax rate has dropped steadily in the last 10 years, to the point where it is now second-lowest in Scott County, and in a comparison of city tax rates in the metro area, Prior Lake has fallen from 25<sup>th</sup> to 45<sup>th</sup> since 2002. We must continue to work with the new council to make certain that we find effective ways to deliver quality services in a fiscally responsible manner.

I am very optimistic about working with the new council members. But at the same time, I am honored to have served with Jim Petersen, Joe Zieska and G. Bryan Fleming, each of whom exemplifies the best characteristics of public service.

As new council members, Cheri Dornbush, Warren Erickson and Steve Millar will bring new ideas, new thoughts, and new energy. I am very confident and optimistic that the three new council members, Councilman Chad LeMair and I can effectively work together to build a better Prior Lake for our citizens of today and tomorrow.