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Stearns County Commissioner Candidate Comments

1. Stearns County has a hiring freeze in place and is facing state-imposed limits on how much it can increase its levy. Do you have specific ideas for how to cope with the tight financial situation? Are there areas you would cut or shift spending?

Our current situation is nothing new. During my service on the County Board, the state has imposed levy limits on numerous occasions. The last really severe budget crunch occurred in 2002-03. Back then we implemented a hiring freeze, reduced staff through attrition, cut back on capital outlay, deferred several road and bridge projects, and closed County offices to public access on Friday afternoons. Some of these options will serve as a starting point this time. One advantage that Stearns has over other counties is its previous investment in technology. This has given us the ability to work smarter and provide better service with fewer people. Stearns County has been recognized nationally several times for its innovation in technology.

2. The county recently updated its comprehensive plan and is revising its land-use ordinances. Is the county doing a good, fair or poor job of managing growth, preserving landowners' property rights and protecting the environment? How could it improve?

Stearns County has been extremely pro-active in addressing many of the environmental issues confronting the area. As one of the largest and most productive agricultural counties in the upper Midwest, we play a critical role in maintaining the vitality of this important industry. Our comprehensive plan emphasizes age land preservation, "smart growth" in our rural areas, improving water quality, and protecting sensitive environmental habitats. Projects such as the Avon Hills Initiative are examples of efforts we can emulate to preserve our natural heritage while balancing the need to accommodate a growing population. Tension between property rights advocates and environmentalists will always present challenges for County Commissioners.

3. Is the County spending too much, not enough or the right amount on parks, trails and open space?

We have been fortunate that the County's aggressive program to acquire park property and develop trails has largely been funded by donations, and state/federal grants. The Lake Wobegone Trail and Quarry Park have quickly gained state and national recognition for their unique features. The expansion of Warner Lake Park and the recent acquisition of nearly 550 acres as part of the new Kramer Lake and Rockville Park properties will likely keep our Park staff busy for many years to come. We hope to shift our emphasis from park and trail acquisition to the development of these properties. Again, the key to the success of our current park system has been an active program to solicit feedback from citizens interested in using these facilities including various recreational interests groups, and the aggressive approach of the County to obtain outside funding for acquisition and development.