



May 19, 2009 edition, "Movers and Shakers" column by Dave Bartholomay, Mayor of Circle Pines, MN

I recently had the opportunity to take a day of vacation from my 'day job' at a software company to teach a government class at Centennial High School, and preparing for that day helped crystallize in my mind the biggest challenge we face today as a suburban community. No, it's not high taxes, barking dogs or that one lousy neighbor that can ruin a neighborhood, although those are all important issues for local governments to address. It's actually the difficulty of building a sense of 'community' within a suburban neighborhood or a city.

As long-time residents will understand, years ago that wasn't so much the case. Our towns were smaller, had less 'turnover', and were a bit more isolated and worked together to get things done. Heck, Circle Pines was actually formed as a 'cooperative' in the 1950's. But now, an American culture focused on materialism, suffering from economic anxiety and under siege from partisan attack politics has driven people to lose faith in government, schools and in the very importance of 'community' in their lives.

Some of our neighbors are at the tipping point, where a job layoff, a broken relationship, or a health-care crisis can rock their self-worth and threaten their fiscal worth. But it doesn't need to be that way. We all understand, deep down inside, that while we may personally appear to be "successful" today, tomorrow we could be the ones needing the support of our church, our neighbors, our community, and yes, perhaps even our government.

I saw a sense of community when I was helping fight the flood in Fargo this Spring. Everyone was working together for a common cause – everyone's effort was appreciated – no one was blaming someone else or 'the government' for their plight. And I wonder why it seems to require a disaster for folks to realize how we all need to work together, day in and day out, to reach out to others and to make our community a healthy, supportive place to grow up and to grow old.

Last month I went to an award ceremony for my neighbor Lynn Rossiter, who was recognized by Anoka County for her inspiring work on behalf of kids who desperately need a helping hand in order to become successful. The volunteer efforts of her and her colleagues make a difference in my community every day, as does the hard work of the teachers and staff from Centennial Schools and the volunteers and supporters of the Centennial Area Food Shelf.

And then I remember why I go to 125 meetings and events a year for the \$4000 I earn as Mayor – because I want to be part of the solution - because I love to see the smiling faces on kids at the annual Golden Lake Park Easter Egg Hunt – because I can't wait to say hi to the 250 residents who drop off recycling at our annual Spring event and hear their concerns and their stories – but most importantly because I remember that I am not alone in this effort. I'm joined and inspired by dozens and dozens of other folks all across the Centennial area working their tails off every day to make our community a better place.

I admit that sometimes I get a little frustrated when folks who don't help share this load complain about taxes or schools or government. It may be their right, but that doesn't make it right. Either try to be a good neighbor and help out or quit complaining and get out of the way, because the work to make a better community for everyone isn't even close to being done.