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'Ugly houses' big issue in race

The Minneapolis-St. Paul Pioneer Press

November 02, 2006

 We're 20 minutes from
downtown Minneapolis
and 10 minutes from
downtown St. Paul

Richard Jezierski believes every American has the right to live in an ugly house without getting bothered by a government inspector.

That's one of the reasons the retired cop is running for a [South St. Paul City Council](#) seat. He wants to rein in what he sees as overly aggressive enforcement of ordinances regulating the appearance of private property, such as the ban on storing boats on lawns.

'If you're not creating a safety hazard or health hazard or conflicting with your neighbors' rights, then leave them alone and let them do what they want,' Jezierski said. 'They've got a right to have an ugly house. That's part of being an American. You're not free if you can't do what you want.'

Jezierski, 64, who retired from the South [St. Paul](#) force in 2000, is one of five candidates vying for three at-large seats. The race has only one incumbent, guaranteeing at least two new faces on the seven-member council.

The lone incumbent on the ballot is Tom Q. Seaberg, 43, group sales manager at Mystic Lake Casino Hotel in [Prior Lake](#). Colleagues David Vujovich and Norm Nistler decided not to seek re-election.

The other three in the race are Micky Gutzmann, 49, who manages a local transportation company; Don Madland, 26, who owns South City Motors Inc. in South St. Paul; and Marilyn Rothecker, 67, who is retired and a former school board member.

All five want to attract more retail stores and restaurants. But the field is divided over City Hall attempts to get residents to abide by minimum-appearance standards governing their homes and yards in the older suburb.

Madland also thinks city inspectors are too picky. He cited the case of an elderly woman who got a warning letter from the city to replace her gravel driveway with a hard-surface one.

'The older people feel pushed around by the way the city's run now,' Madland said.

Seaberg disagreed. He said city inspectors need to enforce ordinances as a way to keep up property values.

'We respect property owners' rights, but we do have a certain set of standards we want people to adhere to,' Seaberg said. 'Do you cater to the 98 percent who keep their houses very nice and yards and everything up to snuff and looking good? Or do you throw up your hands and let those 2 percent do whatever they want to do? We make every effort to maintain quality housing stock. That's vital for us in the long run.'

Rothecker thinks the city needs an education campaign. Property-upkeep ordinances have been on the books for a long time, she said, but only recently enforced.

'People needed to be re-educated about the codes that are on the books and that you have to be responsible,' Rothecker said.

Aside from that issue, the candidates want to diversify a local economy dominated by the light-industrial, warehouse and manufacturing businesses in the 160-acre BridgePoint Business Park along the Mississippi River.

Nobody is promising an overnight solution to South St. Paul's dearth of retail and restaurants, but, Seaberg said, the city is on the right track.

With the coming sale of the 27-acre stockyards, the livestock trade that put the city on the map in 1887, the industrial park will add many more businesses in that space, Seaberg said. He thinks BridgePoint alone will have another 1,000 or so workers beyond the estimated 4,000 people working there now.

The additional employees, Seaberg said, will make it easier for the city to attract restaurants and retail shops.

'We're 20 minutes from downtown [Minneapolis](#) and 10 minutes from downtown St. Paul,' he said. 'We think we're in a good spot. We've got something to sell.'

Aside from economic development, Gutzmann has raised the issue of South St. Paul's changing demographics, specifically the need to help the city's growing number of Hispanics - estimated at 1,200 in the 2000 census - integrate better into civic life.

'We just need to reach out to them and say, 'Let's be together in all of this,'' Gutzmann said. 'I don't think they've been invited in. Integration with the [kids](#) is happening in schools, but it's not happening on the parental level. We need to break down some of the language barriers and get them involved with' community activities and anti-crime initiatives, she said.

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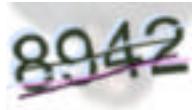
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