

## Candidate Questionnaire Saint Paul Area Association of REALTORS®

Thank you for taking the time to respond to REALTOR® concerns. When you have completed this questionnaire, return it to Candidate Survey, c/o Patrick Ruble via fax at 651-772-6363 or by e-mail at [pruble@spaar.com](mailto:pruble@spaar.com).

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Occupation/Profession: Publisher

Office candidate is seeking: Maplewood City Council

Does your campaign accept Political Action Committee contributions? Yes

*Your comments will be posted on our website.*

1. REALTORS® believe that communities should prepare growth policies that ensure an adequate supply of land for housing of all types and price levels, that promote the wise use of land by permitting the development of high density, walkable, mixed-use communities in appropriate locations, and that provide for land and natural resource preservation. The major tools that communities use to manage land use are comprehensive planning, zoning ordinances, and growth management policies. REALTORS® support land use regulations that strike a fair and reasonable balance between private property rights and community interests. If elected, how will you work to ensure this balance for citizens of Maplewood?

I agree that we need to seek a balance in development and redevelopment (as Maplewood does not have much undeveloped land left, and our future issues may have more to do with redeveloping deteriorating neighborhoods). The demographers tell us we will need much more senior housing in the coming years, but I think we should be wary of putting that housing far away from commerce and services. Attractive senior housing should allow an aging population to remain in or near their long-time neighborhoods, freeing up housing stock there for younger families.

Looking to the future, it seems clear to me that our city also needs to prioritize the environment in our approach to construction and development. We should incentivize green building techniques, to balance environmental concerns with the financial and market needs of development. For example, a builder today may run into difficulties satisfying both our tree ordinance (which discourages the removal of trees) and stormwater management requirements (which typically means infiltration ponds, which may necessitate the removal of trees). We could encourage the use of permeable asphalt with infiltration beneath it, by offering density bonuses

or other incentives. At a recent city council retreat, which I attended as an observer, the council discussed developing a “green ordinance” to codify some of these ideas. Such an ordinance will take a long time to take shape. If elected to the council, I will support its creation. Naturally, these considerations should also be part of our 2008 update to Maplewood's comprehensive land use plan, and the zoning decisions that will implement it.

2. Transportation needs and concerns have increasingly become an issue in the Twin Cities metro area and threatens to diminish the “quality of life” as we know it. Commute times are longer, repair and maintenance costs continue to outpace the availability of funds yet residents and business owners expect and even demand better, faster and more convenient access to safe and convenient roads and transit alternatives. In your view is this assessment of the metro area’s transportation needs (both roads and transit) accurate and should they be addressed immediately. As an elected official what will you do to resolve these concerns and promote the road and transit needs in Maplewood?

The collapse of the I-35W bridge over the Mississippi last week has cast the issue of infrastructure maintenance in stark relief. The lack of transportation spending on the state level has been a minor boon for Maplewood this year however, as our city has moved up numerous street reconstruction projects (such as the Desoto-Skillman and Brookview area street improvements) to take advantage of road construction bids that have been coming in 20% to 30% lower than last year.

As much as I dislike tax increases, I believe our state is long overdue for an increase in the gasoline tax, earmarked for much needed transportation investments. That's obviously not a decision to be made by the Maplewood City Council, but we do need to make sure we get our full share of state aid road and bridge funding.

We can also take a close look at transit needs as we work on the 2008 comprehensive land use plan update. It seems to me that the best transportation investment for the long term is to making planning decisions that will reduce the need for travel. Transportation is a regional issue, so our decisions need to be made in the context of neighboring municipalities.

To provide an example, look at our far southeastern corner, where Maplewood borders Woodbury along the line where Century Avenue might be extended. Woodbury's comp plan envisions commercial, office, or mixed-use development for their side of the border in the future. If Woodbury does develop in this way in future decades, Maplewood could plan to allow housing clustered along our eastern border, letting residents there easily walk to jobs or shopping. A clustering of housing and business would also make for a viable bus route with frequent service.

3. Taxes in general and property taxes in particular are of major concern to home owners and REALTORS®. State and local officials continuously seek new means of raising revenue, either by imposing fees or increasing the tax levy. What is your philosophy on these two methods of generating revenue? How do you intend to balance the needs of Maplewood and the expectations of residents?

I believe it is appropriate for the city to use a mixture of taxes and fees for revenue generation. When it comes to fees, I prefer to see fees whose application and structure is related and proportional to consumption of city services or resources. I would rather avoid fees that amount to a “per capita” tax.

For example, last fall the city council proposed a 440% increase in the electric franchise tax collected through Xcel Energy. I spoke against this proposed increase at the November 13<sup>th</sup> council meeting, and subsequently wrote a letter to the council and Xcel expressing my concerns. (The letter is on my campaign website at <http://www.johnnephew.com/letters/index.php>.) Part of the goal of the proposed tax increase was to derive revenue from various entities located in the city that do not pay property taxes but benefit from city services, such as non-profits, schools, and other government entities. But the more pronounced effect would have been to increase the tax burden on renters, fixed income seniors, and others on the lower end of the economic spectrum, in order to reduce the net tax burden on owners of more expensive homes.

In the big picture, the city council needs to concern itself with restraining the growth of taxes over the long term. To my way of thinking, fiscal responsibility does not simply mean cutting taxes and spending today; it means making smart investments that will deliver quality results and save money over the long run. Let me draw an analogy from my business: While we can get by using five-year-old computers, and save money today by not investing in new equipment, an investment in computing power can pay for itself in staff time that is not spent waiting for the computer to execute a complex task.

When I look at the managerial and budgetary decisions the present city council majority has embraced, I see many choices that appear aimed at savings in the short term, but which cost us more in the end. I would offer the city manager himself as a case in point. The present city manager is compensated less than an experienced professional would expect for this position — but all it takes is the \$50,000 insurance deductible from one needless lawsuit, which a well-qualified manager would know how to avoid, to more than make up the difference. When you add up all the choices of this council majority, it is unfortunate but not surprising that their 2007 budget gave us a tax levy increase of 10.2%, the second highest in the past decade.

4. REALTORS® know that homeownership adds to the quality and stability of neighborhoods and communities. What do you feel are the biggest issues facing Maplewood that will affect its quality of life and community stability?

We need a city government that is efficient, responsive, and transparent. Our quality of life is maintained by investing appropriately in city services (such as police and fire protection) and infrastructure.

At a time when our police department was short-staffed, this council majority fired a 20+ year veteran, Deputy Chief John Banick, by eliminating his job position. We are a civil service city, and state statute dictates that while the council controls the budget and organization, our Police Civil Service Commission (PCSC) is supposed to make decisions about individual officers in terms of hiring, firing, promotion, or demotion. However, the city manager, with the council majority's approval, decided to ignore the PCSC's statutory authority. If the usual procedure was followed, the city would have demoted Banick to Lieutenant, and demoted one Lieutenant to Sergeant. Then we would not now be looking to fill a Sergeant's position on the force. Instead, the city has gone to court to defend the termination of Banick, whose attorney argues that he was punished for performing his duties in ways that did not serve the political or personal agendas of the city manager and members of the council majority. (Banick was assigned to do the background check on City Manager Copeland, which revealed numerous embarrassing facts about his history and lack of qualifications; and in the past he once arrested the mayor's husband.) Our PCSC is meant to be in place as a firewall between law enforcement and politics.

No citizen should wonder if an officer is weighing whether to obey or enforce the law, or to bow to the conflicting wishes of a politician.

Our police are not the only element of the city under assault. Maplewood has long enjoyed such a high quality of life in part because of our parks and open spaces. Unfortunately, the current council majority saw fit to eliminate the Parks and Recreation department, and their city manager has proposed cutting capital funding for parks by 72%. In my door-knocking this summer, I have encountered many parents who expressed concerns about park maintenance and recreation programming, and the confusion that has resulted from splitting duties of the former parks department between Public Works and the city clerk's department. We need a council with a true commitment to our parks and open space, not symbolic gestures like conservation easements.

5. What will be/are your top five goals in the office you are seeking?
  - a) Initiate a proper search for a qualified, professional city manager with appropriate experience and education to manage a city of Maplewood's size.
  - b) Establish an environment of mutual respect and openness in city hall.
  - c) Evaluate issues that come before the council with an eye to fiscal responsibility.
  - d) Reestablish a Parks & Recreation department and a Parks Director.
  - e) Continue and improve Maplewood's tradition as a leader in environmental stewardship.
  
6. Do any of your goals or plans relate to housing and home ownership?

I think affordable housing is very important, and the city should look favorably upon opportunities to expand it. Young families and entry-level workers need access to housing at a price that allows them to save money to eventually become homeowners in Maplewood themselves. As homeowners, we are literally invested in Maplewood, and have an interest in preserving and enhancing the value of our investment. Thus, a healthy middle class of homeowners is the foundation of a strong community.

Good government has a direct impact on a community through city assets and services. A government that is responsive, open, and respectful is also attractive in itself, another positive feature for prospective homeowners.

7. REALTORS® don't just sell homes, they sell neighborhoods, and they sell communities. In what ways can your area REALTORS® be better partners marketing and selling the region as a great place to live, work, play, and do business?

In the financial news, we hear a lot these days about problems in the housing and mortgage markets, and this is surely having an impact in Maplewood, just as it is on other housing markets across the nation. Most of these issues are driven by factors and events far beyond the level of the city council (such as national and global interest rates, deflating real estate bubbles in other markets, changing risk tolerance among lenders and in capital markets, etc.). However, there is clearly an impact on the neighborhood level — on one evening of door-knocking, a resident told me of a house across the street that was in foreclosure, and issues of its maintenance and upkeep. A slump in the real estate market can have a negative effect on neighborhoods and the whole city. I would like to keep an open door to welcome the input of real estate professionals, and would be interested in suggestions on how the city can help maintain our neighborhoods and property values in the face of these challenges. Since the city's finances are heavily dependent

upon the value of its property tax base, we have a high interest in keeping neighborhoods appealing and well maintained. That interest parallels the concerns of realtors and sellers who would like to see houses sell briskly and for good prices.