



COUNTY OF ANOKA

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

GOVERNMENT CENTER
2100 3RD AVENUE STE 700 • ANOKA, MINNESOTA 55303-5024
(763) 323-5700

December 29, 2011

MARTHA WEAVER

Public Information Manager

Direct #763-323-5744

E-mail: martha.weaver@co.anoka.mn.us

Contact: Martha Weaver, Public Information Manager, 763-323-5744, or e-mail: martha.weaver@co.anoka.mn.us

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

2011: A Year of Firsts for Anoka County

The Anoka County Board cut spending in 2011 and applied other cost-saving measures to achieve a 7.43 percent reduction in the property tax levy for 2012. Lowering the levy for the first time in at least 30 years tops the list of 2011 county board accomplishments for Board Chair Rhonda Sivarajah.

“We started the year with the clear understanding that taxpayers were tapped out; we simply could not ask them to pay more in property taxes,” she said. “So we took a comprehensive look at how we could do more with less, and use innovation and creativity to maintain our ability to serve citizens.”

As part of the budget process, a tool was developed to identify which services are mandated, which are essential, and which are nice to have. “This will allow us to establish the budget more strategically in the future, based on priorities, rather than across the board increases or decreases,” Sivarajah said.

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The introduction of a new, one-time Voluntary Separation Program (VSP) will result in an annual savings of \$1.5 million in salary and benefit costs. Employees with at least 10 years of service who met additional requirements were offered incentives to voluntarily leave county employment. The initial outlay was recouped by holding positions open. Future salary and benefit savings will be realized because some positions remain unfilled, some were restructured, and some replacements were hired at a lower pay rate. Learn more about VSP at <http://tinyurl.com/85hxmnt>.

Uncovering ways to boost efficiency and productivity was a common theme in 2011. Lean Kaizen, a workplace process that stresses continuous improvement, was introduced under a pilot program in the County Attorney's Office and Office of Child Support. Staff members from those departments are sharing what they've learned about Lean Kaizen with other county managers and supervisors to implement the process countywide. See more about Anoka County's Lean Kaizen experience at <http://tinyurl.com/7rhupeg>.

At the Highway Department, an innovative project delivery system called design-build is being used on a major construction project. Anoka County is the first county in the state and among the first in the nation to use the design-build process, which streamlines construction by giving the design-build team the authority to manage all phases of a project: design, engineering, and construction. Under design-build, projects are far more likely to be completed on time and on budget. Learn more at <http://tinyurl.com/3jr2zsh>.

The county Highway Department was busy with other projects in 2011. In fact, it was a record year, with the department undertaking the largest construction and pavement rehabilitation schedule in its history. Anoka County had great success bringing in outside revenue for projects, leveraging \$1 of county funds with \$3 in federal and state highway construction dollars for each project.

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Early in 2011, county employees were asked to submit their best ideas on how to do their jobs more efficiently and otherwise stretch county resources. Employees demonstrated their commitment to making their jobs and workplace better by submitting more than 400 ideas. Among them: cut utility bills by reducing the number of bulbs in light fixtures, installing motion detector light switches, and controlling heating and cooling set points; eliminate most county-funded meals and limiting out-of-state travel; and use an election management system to coordinate election logistics and administration.

Anoka County made greater use of technology in 2011 to save staff time and stretch resources. A document imaging project in the Economic Assistance Department allows staff to electronically access data that previously had to be retrieved manually from rows of file cabinets. County board members now receive agendas and board meeting packets electronically, a move that is saving more than 10 reams of paper a month, in addition to staff time and copying costs. All Anoka County marriage records, dating as far back as 1858, have been entered into an electronic database, making for quick and easy access when marriage certificates are requested by the public. New asset management tracking software is being used to stretch the life of county facilities. “This will help ensure that preventive maintenance is completed to avoid costly repairs down the road,” Sivarajah said.

County residents can now do more online with enhancements to the county’s website. For the first time, county board meetings are broadcast live on the county website, giving residents easy access to the business of county government. An online calendar lists all agendas and schedules for public meetings and county-sponsored events, making it convenient for citizens to find information about meetings and programs they may wish to attend. Website improvements have made it easier to apply for a marriage license, look up information on foreclosed properties, or search for people in

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custody—all of which saves staff time and resources. The new Commute Solution website provides information for employers and commuters on alternatives to using a private automobile to get to work. For the first time ever, in the interest of transparency, a special section of the county website was created dedicated solely to the budget. It contains detailed information about where taxpayer's dollars are spent, along with a video explaining the budget and the types of services the county provides. See more at www.anokacounty.us/2012budget.

In a first for Anoka County, board meetings went on the road in 2011. Board meetings convened in Andover, Coon Rapids, Ramsey, Lino Lakes, Blaine, and Fridley in a bid to bring county government closer to the people it serves. “This was a great opportunity to visit our communities and engage residents more directly in the issues that impact their lives,” Sivarajah said.

The official start of several important projects was noted in 2011. In September, Anoka County broke ground on the “Connect Anoka County” high-speed fiber broadband project. The project will link 145 anchor institutions with three core rings, creating a fiber optic backbone that will connect public safety, public works, libraries, law enforcement, city and county buildings, and other community buildings. The backbone will provide a direct advantage to local businesses, passing directly through the county's key business districts and economic development zones. In November, construction began on the Northstar Commuter Rail Station in Ramsey with completion scheduled for late 2012.

With the goal of stretching resources, Anoka County in 2011 introduced the Cooperation and Collaboration Project to explore ways in which the county, municipalities, and school districts can share services, equipment, and other resources. Though still early, project participants have narrowed their focus to Information Technology, Human Resources, and large equipment purchases.

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In September, Standard & Poor's, one of the nation's top credit rating agencies, reaffirmed Anoka County's AAA bond rating, the highest rating possible. The AAA rating means the county can negotiate lower interest rates to finance major projects, saving money for the county, and ultimately, taxpayers. "The AAA rating recognizes our fiscally responsible approach to managing Anoka County's tax dollars," Sivarajah said. "Despite an extremely challenging economic climate, Anoka County is thriving. I look forward to the challenges and opportunities ahead and know that by continuing to work hard, and work smart, we can look forward to an even brighter future."

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