

Labor-endorsed candidates: Maplewood on path to recovery

By Michael Moore

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As a member of the Maplewood City Council, Will Rossbach frequently travels to conferences, workshops and other meetings around the state. Rossbach has come to dread a strange portion of those meetings: introductions.

"I say, 'I'm Will Rossbach. I'm a city council member in Maplewood,'" Rossbach said. "It's gotten a lot better now, but there used to be an audible groan or laughter in the room."

Fairly or unfairly, Rossbach's city has developed a reputation for bad government, and the rehabilitation of that image is part of what's prompted Rossbach to seek the office of mayor this fall. Image may not be everything in local government, but it does affect a city's ability to serve its citizens.

"It's important we get back the respect of our citizens and the people outside our city," Rossbach said. "As we go through various processes, we need help from the county, the state and other cities around us, and we need to have them view us as a valuable, viable partner."

The labor community also has identified an interest in keeping viable partners in office in Maplewood. The St. Paul Regional Labor Federation has endorsed three candidates on the Nov. 3 ballot: Rossbach, incumbent Council Member Kathy Juenemann and challenger James Llanas.

Juenemann, an incumbent seeking her third term, acknowledges the city's bargaining units – whether it's the Fire Fighters, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees or otherwise – have not been treated like partners around Maplewood City Hall in recent years. That's weighed heavily on Juenemann, whose father served on the council in the 1960s.

"While I don't think you should just hand any group of employees what they're asking for without looking into it, the one time in office I've rejected a contract with a bargaining unit, I did it because the contract wasn't legitimate,



it was being forced on the employees by an inexperienced city manager," she said.

That city manager has since departed, and all three labor-endorsed candidates say they are committed to restoring Maplewood's reputation as a positive place to work.

"Voters want someone who can focus on our city budget and making sure our employees are treated fairly," Llanas said. "My campaign is about bringing back civility, about putting residents first and personalities second."

"We need all the employees we have, so treating them the best we can and retaining them has to be a goal," Juenemann said. "Our product is service, and if we don't have the right people and talented people to deliver the service, we ought to go out of business."

The labor-endorsed candidates also agree that the city council needs to continue working to make Maplewood a place working families can thrive. That work includes:

- Making sure housing remains affordable for families of all income levels.

"People who work in Maplewood with working-class jobs often couldn't afford to not only own a home, but rent," Juenemann said. "We're a little short on rentals, and we've tried to (build) some so people who work at the mall, fast food, Rainbow and Cub, so they could afford to try to live in this community."

- Creating a "good atmosphere" for job creation in Maplewood.

"The biggest thing we've done is formed an economic development

authority, which will allow the city to play a bigger role in helping our businesses and our residents have the potential for things to happen," Rossbach said.

- Maintaining a basic level of public services, and restoring the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

"People in Maplewood really enjoy spending time as a family when they're not at work, and as a city we need to maintain our open spaces and our parks," Llanas said. "The Park and Rec Board is operating on a skeleton budget. It impacts how people view our parks if trash is not hauled away regularly or if it takes long to cut the grass."

Of course, the labor-endorsed candidates also know doing the work of making Maplewood a place working families can thrive depends on electing a mayor and city council members committed to serving the public – not grinding personal axes.

"We have gotten a lot better since the last election two years ago," Rossbach said. "We don't have as many people suing us, we're not in the paper for bad things."

"Still, we are borderline dysfunctional. We need people who are actually willing to work on the issues facing the city with each other. There's a continuous battle of one-upmanship that keeps happening in the city. It seems there are some games being played."

That's why Rossbach wants to move from his council seat into the mayor's chair. "Our current mayor has lost control of the situation," he said.