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Lake Elmo's new mayor looks ahead to tackle growth

Article by: NANCY CROTTI , Special to the Star Tribune Updated: December 28, 2012 - 5:44 PM

Mike Pearson, who defeated three-term incumbent Dean Johnston for the mayor's job, wants the city to be deliberate in how it plans for and manages growth.

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The top issues facing new Mayor Mike Pearson and Lake Elmo is the growth mandate from the Metropolitan Council plus the visions from varying interests.

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The incoming mayor of Lake Elmo knows he's got a lot of work to do.

Mike Pearson, who spent two years each on the city Planning Commission and the City Council, is poised to take over as mayor Jan. 2.

He walks into the job when the city's biggest issue, in his mind, is how to carry out the growth mandate handed down by the Metropolitan Council -- and to bring together the varying interests around how to grow Lake Elmo.

The Met Council expects the population to triple to 24,000 by 2030. To do that, the city is required to come up with plans to manage growth in the Old Village and along the Interstate 94 corridor.

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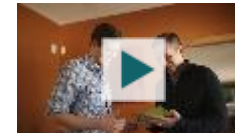
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Pearson's related priorities are transportation and ways to make city staff continuity a priority -- issues that will help implementing plans for expansion go more smoothly.

"Lake Elmo will grow and changes will come and we will handle that process," Pearson said. "Lake Elmo is serious now."

Plans to redevelop the heart of the city, including adding more than 900 housing units, have some residents worried about changing the city's small-town character. He wants the city to be deliberate in how it carries out the development mandate.

"I'd like to see a vibrant downtown, a sense of space, a sense of place," said Pearson, who defeated three-term incumbent Mayor Dean Johnston in November. "We're in the fortunate position of having a great staff and absolutely benefiting from all the hard work of all the individuals through the years. And our task is to keep it wonderful, unique, while still allowing that growth."

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A representative of Lennar Homes presented a concept plan Dec. 10 to the city Planning Commission for a 317-unit residential development on 80 acres of farmland between Keats and Inwood Avenues, according to City Administrator Dean Zuleger.

If those and other plans are approved, city officials will have to deal not only with an influx of people, but of vehicles. The prospective opening of the new St. Croix River bridge in 2016 promises to bring more traffic through Lake Elmo. The Old Village district plan studies a realignment of Hwy. 5, which now runs through the heart of downtown, to reroute "cut-through" traffic.

Pearson said he wants to prevent cut-through traffic in Lake Elmo while providing residents safe access to Hwy. 36 on the north side of Old Village. He also wants to address the speed limit on Hwy. 5 in front of Lake Elmo Elementary School. The current speed limit is 40 miles per hour.

A native of Maplewood, Pearson has owned Performance Pool and Spa for 22 years and has lived in Lake Elmo for 14. Political insiders describe him as a calming influence and a good listener who works hard and respects others.

"When he comes to a meeting, he doesn't have his mind necessarily made up," recently re-elected Council Member Anne Smith said. "He listens and analyzes and bases his decision on the conversation that's at the table. I think that's important."

Pearson had two years left in his council term when he was elected mayor, and the person chosen by the council to replace him will affect what Pearson is able to accomplish as mayor, according to former Council Member Steve DeLapp, who described Pearson as personable and practical.

"Mike is taking a balanced approach to all of this," DeLapp said. "He respects the views of the residents of Lake Elmo who voted for him. He respects the views of the businesses in Lake Elmo that pay taxes. He tries not to pit people against one another. He tries to do things to make as many people happy as possible."

DeLapp said he believes Pearson will be more fiscally conservative than his predecessor and less willing to spend money on infrastructure than Johnston. DeLapp doesn't believe Pearson's relative lack of political experience will work against him.

"I think he's got enough, with people around him. He's never shy to get help," DeLapp said. "He'll call them and grill them over what they think of something. He treats everybody with a lot of respect."

Smith said she believes Pearson will work well with the Met Council and the Minnesota Department of Transportation on growth issues. A real estate agent, she's looking forward to the city's future and its development.

"I think Lake Elmo to a certain extent gets a bad rap," Smith said. "There is good leadership. We are moving forward. We have never stopped working on the Village or the I-94 corridor. The market fell apart, and that's why nothing has come to fruition yet. But it's turning around and it's coming."

Pearson said he believes all the squabbling over the Met Council's requirements is now part of the history of a city that is poised to move forward.

"It's certainly going to be a change," he said. "It'll be obvious, but I think this council recognizes that it's coming and really accepts it."

Nancy Crotti is a Twin Cities freelance writer.



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