

Don Ness for Mayor

THE POLICY REPORT - VOLUME I



Don Ness believes the best public policy is created when elected officials honor the complexity of the issues before them as well as honor the intelligence and insight of those they seek to represent. Inside, you'll find a brief explanation of Don's positions on six of the most pressing issues facing Duluth. This Policy Report reflects Don's commitment to run a campaign based on the strength of his vision for our city's future and his specific ideas for improving our city's government.



www.NessForMayor.com

Retiree Health Care • Workforce Development • Public Safety
Streets and Infrastructure • Environmental Sustainability • Land Use Planning

A Constructive Approach to Public Service

Having been in city government for the past eight years, I have a clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and skills needed to be an effective Mayor and leader for this community. From my perspective, the three primary skills needed are:

- 1) The ability to communicate a coherent vision, and understand the often nuanced and complex dynamics in City Hall and in our community.
- 2) The skill necessary to guide the public's interest through competing interests, limited resources, and powerful political forces that influence the public process.
- 3) Competent leadership, which includes an ability not only to lead, but to empower city employees, as well as to inspire our citizens to contribute to the betterment of our community.

Innovation and customer service in city government will be the hallmarks of my administration. By exploring how we can improve service through creativity and empowerment, we can and will create a new spirit of cooperation in city government.

Our city is struggling right now with a combative political culture, which has served as an unfortunate and unwelcome impediment to progress. I have a history of setting a more constructive and civil tone in the community discussion, and, as mayor, I will work to bring citizens together behind a common vision for Duluth's future. My work with the Retiree Health Care Task Force was an example of how, when politics are removed from an issue, we can achieve considerable results.

Frustration has become the most powerful emotion in city government today. It's found in our citizens, our employees and our public servants. Our citizens are frustrated by the quality of service they receive. Our city employees are frustrated by an outdated code, ineffective tools and technologies, understaffed departments, and a lack of support to do their jobs well. And *everyone* is frustrated by the division. I know we can do better.



*“The City of Duluth desperately needs a new generation of leadership in the mayor’s office. **Don Ness knows and understands the complicated web of city issues and the political nuances needed to deal with them – and Ness has the ability and strength of character to face these issues head on.”***

-- Ken Hogg, Duluth City Councilor (1996-2004)

For more information please visit www.nessformayor.com

The Duluth Advantage

Sharing our Story

Duluth's future will be determined by our success in attracting investment, good jobs, and talented, hardworking people. We are in competition with communities like Fargo, Rochester, the Twin Cities, and communities all across the upper Midwest. I believe that Duluth has qualities and characteristics that give us a tremendous advantage in this competition, but to date we have not capitalized our strengths, though we tend to highlight and dwell upon our challenges.

Duluth has so many strengths that it would be impossible to list them all. It's our natural beauty – the clean air, the lake, and the abundant greenspace. It's our more relaxed lifestyle. It's our values of community and compassion. Above all, it's our people – creative, hardworking and civic-minded. And it's that intangible spirit and connection through the shared values of those who choose to live here. We call these wonderful attributes that make our city special, the *Duluth Advantage*.

As a city, we need to do a better job of using these advantages to encourage investment and job creation in our area. We must move away from speaking generically about the quality of life and natural beauty. In order to attract people, investment, and businesses, we need to get the whole story out in a more specific and relevant way.

Duluth suffers from a perception problem – an all too widespread belief that our government is unfriendly to business. Unless we are able to change that perception (within our city and beyond) it will become our fate. As your mayor, I will make sure the city becomes a solid partner in economic development efforts by providing quality services and a faster, more efficient process in City Hall. Solving retiree health care, designing a new zoning code, encouraging investment in housing, and strong support of our core city services will demonstrate to potential employers that Duluth has turned a corner – and is a great place to do business.

Once we achieve these, we must make sure our accomplishments are communicated proudly through creative, niche marketing to business owners and talented workers of all ages. From startups to long-established companies, from recent college graduates to soon-to-be-retirees, everyone can all find their perfect fit right here in Duluth.

As your Mayor, I will see to it that we meet the challenges that contribute to this perception problem, and that we share our successes with the world. I believe we as residents are the best people to spread this message. I hope that by bringing a new, more positive approach to city hall, positivity will spread throughout our city.



By investing in what makes Duluth good, we can make Duluth great

Read Don's Blog at www.duluthadvantage.com

Retiree Health Care

Addressing Duluth's Most Pressing Issue

In 1983, the city granted free medical coverage for life to all retired city employees and their families. At the time, healthcare coverage was far less expensive than it is today, and doing so cost the city less than annual pay raises. Over the past 24 years, the cost has skyrocketed, and the unfunded liability has gone from \$34.2 million in 1999, to \$178.5 million in 2002, to \$279 million in 2005 – and it's growing every day. This increase is not due to a change in benefit, but rather a change in the cost of providing that benefit.

Had the City remained on this course, this would have eventually bankrupted the city. It wasn't until 2005 that any serious attempt has been made to address, much less solve, this growing crisis with the establishment of the Retiree Health Care Task Force.



My Plan:

While it has been a slow and painful process, important progress has been made in implementing the Task Force plan. I have been, and will continue to be, fully committed to making the difficult decisions necessary to solve this crisis.

I believe it's critical that city retirees receiving this generous benefit also contribute to the solution. It is a controversial, but necessary, step. Retirees have an obligation to contribute to this larger solution, just as Duluth taxpayers are sacrificing to provide a sustainable benefit for them.

Moving all **current retirees to a single plan** with modest co-pays and deductibles will reduce the unfunded liability for the taxpayers of Duluth by over \$30 million. Coupled with competitively bidding health insurance coverage for retirees, the **total cost savings of this action could exceed \$50 million**. No single policy decision will be more important to the fiscal health of our community.

"I believe Don demonstrated great leadership and foresight in establishing the Task Force, and that he provided the guidance, support, and freedom necessary so that the Task Force could effectively advocate for the best interests of the Public"

-- Sandy Sandbulte, Task Force Chair

Leadership in Action:

Don Ness demonstrated decisive leadership on the issue when he initiated the Retiree Health Care Task Force in the summer of 2005. Don empowered experienced citizens to address the issue with the goal of solving this financial crisis. Don has since then been a champion for their recommendations which require concessions from city employees and retirees, administrative improvements, and investing funds with the State Board of Investment.

There are no easy answers in addressing a financial crisis of this magnitude – but the process that Don started over two years ago has the potential to create a sustainable benefit for the long-term, while greatly reducing the future burden on Duluth taxpayers.

Workforce Development

Skill & Talent Development = Productivity for Local Employers

Within the next decade, our Boomers will retire, creating a labor shortage across the nation. In our region alone, experts predict an estimated 75,000 job openings. Coupled with a smaller generation entering the workforce, Duluth will face an unprecedented shortage of workers. We're already starting to feel the crunch in healthcare and energy, and it's only a matter of time until every business sector experiences a similar shortage of skilled workers. This is a serious threat to the productivity of our local businesses.

My Plan:

As Mayor, I will redirect our economic development efforts away from attempts to lure the "big fish" to an investment in a workforce development system that benefits our local employees and employers alike.

I have already initiated a workforce development strategy group, made up of leaders in business, education, and community development to design a comprehensive workforce system in Duluth. We will determine the skill needs of local employers and then develop strategies designed to meet those needs—all the way down to creating specific training-to-work plans for anyone looking to improve their career.

There are two primary outcomes to this plan: 1) under-prepared workers will gain skills and be able to move into better paying careers and 2) our local employers will benefit from having a larger pool of qualified candidates to fill their particular skill and talent needs. Employers will also enjoy lower costs related to recruitment, hiring, and training and will benefit from a better prepared and more productive workforce.

Fighting Crime At Its Source

Community Policing - A Strategy for Stronger and Safer Neighborhoods

One of our city's strongest assets is our unique neighborhoods, and I want to make sure that each is a safe, attractive place to live. Crime is not specific to any one area of our city, and we need to make sure we give each the attention that it needs. I am committed to community policing, as I believe it is one of the most effective ways to deter crime. We saw it happen, here and nationwide, in the 1990s, when investment in community policing was a top priority.

There's great value and benefit in putting officers into the neighborhoods – their work becomes proactive rather than reactive. By developing relationships with neighbors, and by identifying problem properties and problem people, officers can develop strategies that will address crime at its source.

My Plan:

Investment in community policing will be my top funding priority. Police Chief Gordon Ramsey is a strong advocate of this strategy, and I will work in partnership with the Chief to provide the staff and resources necessary to carry it out.

We must be innovative in our approach and procedures in policing and give officers modern tools to quickly and efficiently get information in their hands at the moment they need it. We must also invest in quality crime-fighting technology so that we catch criminals before they become repeat offenders. And we must fully staff our police department. While a proactive approach is best, crime is an unfortunate reality, and we must address it as such in order to make our neighborhoods safe.

Environmental Sustainability



The Issue:

Duluth has long been a pioneer of promoting more sustainable efforts in both the public and private sectors, and under a Ness administration, that commitment will continue.

Currently, the City of Duluth spends about \$4 million on energy per year – and I see in that number a tremendous opportunity for cost savings. Duluthians, as a whole, spend \$250 million per year on electricity, gasoline and fuel oils. Of this, nearly 80 percent is imported. If we use more local, alternative energy sources, Duluth has a chance to keep millions of dollars in our local economy.

My Plan:

In 2001, I initiated our city's enrollment in the Cities for Climate Protection program, which has provided our city with over \$1 million in cost savings. As mayor, I will continue to invest in this effective program. I'm proud of our advances with the Duluth Steam Plant's increase in energy efficiency. The plant was given \$1 million from Climate Trust to work toward decreasing steam plant emissions by 20 percent. The result is saving over \$5 million over the next 15 years—at no upfront cost to taxpayers. This is an example of an innovative approach to this issue, and should be seen as a model for further efficiency projects.

We can commit to the Natural Step model to create city policy that reduces our reliance on fossil fuels and limits activities that harm our natural environment, yet still meets our city's economic and development needs fairly and efficiently. This program has already proven successful in Europe and Canada, and could be a key factor in making Duluth a premier small-city example of a sustainable community.

Modern Land Use Zoning Code

Increasing our tax base and protecting our natural assets.

The Issue:

The completion of the Comprehensive Plan was a great accomplishment. Thousands of hours of citizen involvement resulted in a powerful plan that encourages investment and development, while simultaneously protecting the natural assets and character of our natural surroundings. Unfortunately, nothing has been done to date to further this plan.

We need to revamp our zoning code to encourage investment our city and meet the modern expectations of prospective homeowners and developers. Currently, folks are forced to enter a lengthy and arduous variance process, even for the simplest improvements.

My Plan:

Our community cannot afford any further delay of the implementation of a new code. We must identify resources to make it a reality. As mayor, I will hire a zoning code specialist who will be responsible for the creation, implementation and enforcement of the new code. And I'll empower our citizens to guide and direct its formation. By the end of 2008, I will present to our City Council a new code that fits the realities of our community and provides modern zoning business standards to Duluth for their consideration and vote.

By taking this on, we have the chance to create a unified zoning code which will seamlessly incorporate state and federal standards on land use. A developer, homeowner, or landowner who wants to invest in the city will only need one document to reference the standards they will need to follow to build in Duluth. The end result is a modern, unified zoning code that's user-friendly and will encourage economic investment in Duluth.

Streets And Infrastructure

Paying for the Neglect of the Past

There's been a long history of neglect when it comes to funding our city's streets and sewer infrastructure. By the early 1990s, that infrastructure was literally crumbling beneath us. In 1994, the city finally addressed this problem, implementing the Street Improvement Program to rebuild our city's streets.

This has been a successful program; however, it has not been aggressive enough. If we continue to work at this rate, it would take over 100 years to replace them all.



My Plan:

I pledge to at least double our commitment to the Street Improvement Program by the year 2011. This is possible if we redirect funds to the program, stretch the public contribution to the program, and more effectively prioritize where those funds are spent. In 2009, the first of the 15-year Street Improvement bonds issued at the start of this program will retire. I will reinvest every single dollar of those available funds back into the Street Improvement Program.

We can also increase the amount of reconstruction by becoming more aggressive in investing those dollars. By moving from government bonds to a more balanced portfolio, I believe we can double the annual revenue generated for street improvement.

We must also prioritize reconstruction of the streets we use the most – it just makes sense. The city has reconstructed too many dead-ends and back-neighborhood streets. I agree that all of streets needed to be fixed, but repairing these should not trump repairing the most heavily traveled.

In addition to reconstruction, we must also implement an aggressive resurfacing system for city streets. Doing this effectively doubles the lifetime of our city streets at a fraction of the cost of complete reconstruction.

“The condition and quality of our street system and public infrastructure is an important indicator of the quality and health of our community. As your mayor, I will keep our infrastructure on the forefront of our agenda.”

-Don Ness

Reducing Costly Breaks in Our Sewer System

Streets aren't the only infrastructure that requires our attention. Sewer and water infrastructure below the streets must also be replaced as we reconstruct our streets. By making those investments now, we can reduce the number of costly, labor-intensive water and sewer line breaks that burden taxpayers and create frustrating service interruptions.



Don's Childhood Home in the Hillside



Don is the Oldest of Four Boys



The Ness Family at Chester Bowl

Dear Fellow Duluthian,

I'm proud to be a product of Duluth. Our community has shaped the person I am today, and has instilled in me strong values – the values of hard work, service, cooperation and compassion.

I was born and raised on the Hillside, and it's still the place I love to call home. My Dad was a pastor for a small, non-denominational Christian church, my Mom worked for the church and for the battered women's shelter. My childhood was strongly influenced by my family's church congregation, a tightly-knit group – a community in and of itself. These inspirational people shared a compassionate awareness of the ways we are responsible to and for each other. That awareness is what motivates my desire to serve.

You have twice elected me to the Duluth City Council, and in my role as councilor, I've worked hard to earn your trust. During my tenure, I've successfully brought together diverse interests, solving problems through finding common ground and honoring the complexity of the issues before us. As your mayor, I pledge to create a new, positive city hall, a city hall where citizens from all perspectives feel respected and get the service they deserve.

I know the challenges our city faces, because I've invested 8 years working on them. I know the struggles of working men and women in Duluth, because that is my life experience.

I'm proud of my roots and my long-standing commitment to our city, and I'm excited to continue my work to better it. I'd be honored to have your vote November 6.

Sincerely,

Don Ness



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**Please Vote
November 6**