

# County Commissioner races

## Hennepin County: Fernando vs. Yang

by Gail Olson

Hennepin County District 2 includes Golden Valley, Medicine Lake, North and Northeast Minneapolis, the southeast section of Plymouth, and St. Anthony Village.

Irene Fernando co-founded a non-profit agency and works for Thrivent Financial. Blong Yang, an attorney, was a Minneapolis City Council member.

Before the August primary, the Northeast e-mailed the following three questions to the candidates. 1) Please briefly describe your background: education, employment, public offices held. 2) If you are elected, what unique talents or skills will you bring to this office? 3) Hennepin County has a wide range of initiatives that seek to address community issues such as health, the environment, homelessness, the opioid crisis, redevelopment, transportation, parks, and the public works infrastructure. Please choose one area in which you think the county does a good job, and explain. In what area or areas, in your opinion, might the county focus more attention, money and resources?

Below are the answers from the candidates who advanced. An article with their responses to questions at a business forum appears in the October 31, 2018 Northeast.

### Irene Fernando

At the age of 17, I co-founded Students Today Leaders Forever (STLF), a youth leadership nonprofit with a mission of revealing leadership through service, relationships, and action. I worked at STLF for 11 years—during which 22,000 students came through our programs—creating jobs and recruiting national talent into Minnesota. In 2013, I was selected by the Twin Cities Business Journal as one of 40 under 40, and awarded The (Real) Power 50 by Minnesota Business Magazine. In 2015, I was selected to be a Bush Foundation fellow and began teaching social entrepreneurship at St. Mary's University. Currently, I work within a newer division at Thrivent Financial leading around organizational design, culture, and talent.

I have a proven track record of leading within complex, mission-driven organizations that serve a variety of needs. I will work to bring a culture of transparency and accountability to county government, and rely on relationship building, including those I have built over the last 15 years as a community leader, to help me serve the needs of our District 2 residents.

I would identify Heading Home Hennepin as an example of the good and important work Hennepin County does. By collaborating with the community and bringing new strategies and resources to the table, Hennepin County has been able to significantly reduce the number of persons experiencing homelessness. I think Heading Home Hennepin is a great example of what local government is capable of doing when we place the community at the center of our decision-making process. I am eager to support this important project as your next Commissioner.

I believe Hennepin County has the opportunity to offer more quality, coordinated health and human services by focusing on the ways in which the needs of our residents are interconnected. I am committed to starting with a holistic view of the people the county serves and finding solutions that meet their needs. I think there are exciting opportunities for the county to provide better quality services and reduce costs long-term through this approach.

### Blong Yang

I graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Minnesota Law School. My first job out of law school was at the Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis, advocating for limited English proficiency persons in the areas of housing and social services. After Legal Aid, I opened a solo law practice to help those who didn't qualify for legal aid services but needed representation. I served on the Commitment Defense Panel of the Hennepin County Bar Association where I represented people in danger of being committed for mental illness and/or chemical dependency. I then worked as an investigator with the Minneapolis Department of Civil Rights. From 2014-2017, I served on the Minneapolis City Council representing Ward 5. While on the City Council, I chaired the Public Safety, Civil Rights, and Emergency Management Committees.

Hennepin County has more than 20 percent of the state's population and more than 30 percent of all jobs—in 3 jobs—in the state. Our economy is the engine that moves the state forward. I will bring experience and an ability to balance a budget in a government organization as county commissioner. With my professional experience as an elected Minneapolis City Council member and as an attorney, I am uniquely positioned to provide a voice on the County Board that represents Hennepin County residents. My personal experience also contributes to my reason for running. As the oldest son of poor Hmong refugees, my family has been a recipient of county services. I've spent my professional career helping people navigate the system. I also understand the importance of diversity and reducing disparities.

Hennepin County is innovating in strategic planning to reduce disparities—examples include its new programs to rehabilitate homes using small, women- and minority-owned businesses, hiring a director of disparity reduction, and its April 2018 board action to enhance the county's Small Business Enterprise program. The Hennepin County workforce now is 62 percent women and 28 percent employees of color. A Star Tribune article last year noted that county leaders estimate that doing away with racial and ethnic disparities in income and employment would foster a full \$4.6 billion in economic growth. I will continue to support and expand this important work as county commissioner.

A county commissioner must maintain a balance between the needs of residents and businesses with property taxes. Our region is approaching a shortage of workers due to changing demographics and we will need trained, skilled workers. Providing human services means providing critical services in our communities and includes initiatives for families and children like child protection and access to early childhood education. I will work with our partners at the state to make sure state-mandated services are not solely paid for by Hennepin County taxpayers.

Improving recycling systems and protecting our environmental resources will help maintain the environment for our children. Affordable housing that prioritizes housing for county clients and investment in the Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing Fund to support the preservation of existing affordable rental housing are investments to provide safe, affordable housing for all.

A transportation system that gets people to work helps our region remain economically competitive with top employers. Whether light rail, roads and bridges, or a bicycle network, I have the experience to move these initiatives forward in partnership with business, government and other partners.

## Anoka County: Broom vs. Meisner

compiled by Margo Ashmore

After 32 years of service, Jim Kordiak will retire from the Anoka County Board; his father held the District 4 seat for 32 years before him.

The Northeast offered candidates the opportunity to interview or email their answers to four questions before the primary, and the answers of the two who survived the primary are presented here. Broom was interviewed, Meisner emailed answers. The questions:

1.) In 50 words or less, your qualifications and background.

2.) List three things that the county government does, that directly affect residents of Columbia Heights, that you or constituents you've talked with believe need improvement, and what you would do about them.

3.) In what ways might your views and perspective differ from (or be similar to) the two former commissioners who held this seat? Please cite a specific example.

4.) Transportation gets mentioned early in conversations. What needs to be done, and what do you see yourself accomplishing regarding transportation as it affects Columbia Heights?

### Sean Broom

**Qualifications/bio:** Currently policy director for Minneapolis Area Chamber of Commerce, was policy aide to Congressman Keith Ellison, then Minneapolis Council Member Blong Yang. Married, father of three-year-old daughter, five year Columbia Heights resident. Self-described nerd, passionate about policy, "I know what it takes to be a legislator and a good, professional colleague."

**Three county functions to be improved:** Roads/transit, parks and libraries. Broom would like to see expanded library services, and longer hours in general. Parks are a manifestation of the county's commitment to the environment, water management and to all of the families and residents of Anoka County."

Broom hastens to add, as he's door-knocking, that improvements need to be done while keeping property taxes down, and to be able to point to the tangible things done with tax dollars. "The county's functions touch everybody's life, particularly, if you hit the skids."

He described being homeless at 15 and 16 years old with his mom, little sister and three cats in a van. "It's not the only thing that defines who I am, but I know the feeling of a county service coming through and being the difference."

**Perspectives and views compared to previous commissioners:** "I would be more of a transit advocate. There have been strong transit advocates on the board before, Dan Erhart and Dennis Berg. It just didn't happen to be in the Kordiaks' wheelhouse. I would also have an increased interest in economic development. A recent study showed basically that with some promotion we have a great opportunity to attract business here."

**Transportation:** "County roads are generally the last streets you'll travel on before you reach your home street. In Heights, that's the major east-west, anything that has an intersection with state Highway 47 (University Avenue). The best example: four of five Columbia Heights schools are on 49th and kids are getting hit. It has incomplete sidewalks and no bike paths. The county can be a partner in getting sidewalks and other safety measures for the kids."

As for transit, "we need to be an advocate for transit, for better buses on highways 47 and 65, and every possible option to connect us to the region and the state. Transit is transformational."

### Mandy Meisner

**Qualifications/bio:** I have lived in the community for nearly 20 years. During this time, I have served on numerous boards, committees and local projects including SACA, Springbrook, and the Lee Carlson Center for Mental Health. Currently, I am the Community Relations Manager for the North Metro Mayor Association.

**Three county functions to be improved:** Issues I have heard the most about from residents are:

1) Senior Services. Seniors have told me about their desires to remain independent and in their own homes. As County Commissioner I will work with agencies and committees preparing and supporting our aging population.

2) Taxes. Many I speak with are on fixed incomes and frustrated when taxes are increased. My first budget priority would be to take a good look at the "General Services" that account for the largest section of the Anoka County expenses. I've been meeting with county employees and will continue to do that as a County Commissioner to listen to their ideas and gain a better understanding of where we might be able to increase innovation and quality of services, while reducing/eliminating redundancies that are wasting taxpayer dollars. As a community partner over the past decade, I understand the support our local nonprofit organizations offer people in need. By bridging the gaps we can offer needed services while being fiscally responsible.

3) Road Safety. In Columbia Heights there are several intersections along University Avenue of concern. While University Avenue is a state road and not under the jurisdiction of the county, as Commissioner I would use my current relationships with leaders at MNDOT like Senior Engineer Scott McBride to communicate and problem solve. State Representative Connie Bernardy is the DFL lead on the Transportation and Regional Governance Policy Committee in the House and I am confident in our ability to work together to create safe roads. I am on the Fridley Police Advisory Board consistently reviewing road safety issues and discussing collaborative solutions. Road safety affects our entire district and it is vital that Columbia Heights, Spring Lake Park, Hilltop, and Fridley work together for common sense solutions.

**Perspectives and views compared to previous commissioners:** Al and Jim Kordiak have held this seat for 64 years. Both have been advocates for progressive values, protecting union jobs, looking ahead to community needs and being available to constituents to solve problems. In all of these areas, I will carry on what they started. I am the only labor endorsed candidate and I understand the importance of unions because my dad was a union worker through his entire career. Now, more than ever, we must protect workers and good paying jobs in Anoka County. As a community service leader for the last decade, I have a diverse network that informs me of current issues and how we can work together to solve them.

**Transportation:** My focus is on making the county work for the people of Southern Anoka County and not necessarily adopting policies that are a continuation of the core cities. Columbia Heights, Hilltop, Fridley and Spring Lake Park are different than Minneapolis. Our needs are different. And our solutions are different. We need safe and well-maintained roads to connect our communities to jobs, education, and to move goods and services. We also need accessible public transportation so that our residents can get to work and school while reducing their carbon footprint. Public transportation isn't only about getting from one place to another, it is another tool in our toolbox to reduce emissions and move towards becoming a greener economy in Anoka County. More public transportation is an economic driver. People have to be able to get to jobs. Not everyone has a car. As Commissioner I will work to get the best transportation options for my community that make sense and are fiscally responsible.

# Columbia Heights Mayor contest

by **Cynthia Sowden**

The Columbia Heights City Council chambers were stuffed and overflowing the evening of July 18 when candidates for mayor shared their ideas with the public. The forum was sponsored by ABC League of Women Voters and HeightsNEXT. Kathy Tingelstad, a lobbyist and public relations consultant from Coon Rapids, served as moderator. The videotaped forum is online at [https://www.columbiaheightsmn.gov/news\\_detail\\_T17\\_R180.php](https://www.columbiaheightsmn.gov/news_detail_T17_R180.php). Here are the verbatim answers from the candidates who survived the primary, followed by material from our interviews with them and a post-primary forum.

## **What are your background and qualifications?**

**Donna Schmitt** was raised in Hermantown, Minn., and graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the University of Minnesota-Duluth. She's been married for 41 years. A member of the Kiwanis, she also serves on the board of HeightsNEXT and on the Multicultural Advisory Committee. She defeated Gary Peterson for the mayor's seat in 2016.

**Connie Buesgens** grew up in Carver County. She's lived in Los Angeles, Seattle and Minneapolis and for the last 19 years, in Columbia Heights. She's active in HeightsNEXT, has served on the Planning and Zoning Commission and has served as a City Council member since 2016.

## **Why are you seeking this office?**

**Buesgens:** I believe it's time to start a new chapter. Columbia Heights is hot right now. We have Hy-Vee coming into our city. We have housing prices going through the roof. I just looked at the assessment values. The assessed values for our properties have gone up 15.2 percent in the last year. We have lots of new families coming into the city, new energy, and new babies being born. I'm seeing lots of baby strollers on the sidewalks – more than I've seen since I moved here 19 years ago. As your mayor, I want to keep moving forward, to continue to improve our quality of life.

**Schmitt:** I ran two years ago and I'm running again because I love this city, and I want to see it be the best it can be. I would like to follow through with some of the decisions that are coming up. The city staff has done a great job in encouraging new businesses to come to our city, and I would like to see that continue. We have lost the majority of our industrial area to housing; we became more dependent on residents to come up with the tax base. We are a place where people live and eat, but when it comes to work, they go elsewhere. We need to encourage light industrial and commercial development; we need to prepare for the coming of Hy-Vee; we need to follow through with the office building on 40th and Central.

## **As mayor, what will you do to promote diversity and inclusion and to bring up leaders from under-represented communities?**

**Schmitt:** As mayor, I am part of the Multicultural Advisory Committee. Many people are on that committee that are from different cultures. We get together and talk about situations that specifically affected them and their association with the police. As a resident and a regular citizen, I've been working with the Islamic Center, attending the Christian-Muslim dialogue that they have during the school year. They're very good discussions. They help us understand what is going on in their culture, we help them to understand how we look at the culture.

**Buesgens:** When I lived in Seattle, one thing I learned was to treat everyone with respect. I met people from everywhere. Between Boeing and Microsoft bringing in people from around the world, I learned to be open. I learned so much and I enjoyed it. I was happy to move to Columbia Heights, where I can experience the same thing. One thing I would look at is creating events that bring us together with things we have in common. One is an adult regulation-size soccer field. There are so many different people that play soccer. It's one thing we have in common. We can get together, rub shoulders and get to know each other.

## **How will you work to protect the rights and safety of our immigrant residents?**

**Schmitt:** As I work with our [police] chief, we have discussed several times how do we protect every resident here, not just the

citizens, but the ones who are here, however they came. We need to make sure that they feel safe to report crime. So that they feel safe; they won't have people knocking on their door all hours of the night. We also need to help the residents who have been here for many, many years feel safe. We are working with them; it's not going to be perfect. We're doing our best in our community to keep our residents safe. We're not Minneapolis, but we're making sure we're protecting our residents.

**Buesgens:** The biggest thing for me is trust. We need to find people within our community who we can talk to so that as concerns come up, we can use that trust. Education is another way. I've had people from different cultures contact me. I've worked with them and the police department to solve their issues. Some are afraid to call. I think the biggest thing is to try to find ways to build trust. I know our police department's working very hard to do that. Creating a multicultural police force is one way. Events in the city, getting out into the city and interacting with people so that they feel comfortable talking with us when issues come up.

## **What is your perspective on Smart Streets and adequate roads for trucks and commerce?**

**Schmitt:** Smart Streets is a term that's been bandied about by multiple commissions at the state, federal and local level. Some of the aspects of smart streets can be pretty smart. We have some very wide roads in Columbia Heights that don't need to be that wide, like 40th. We are actually looking at possibly narrowing that down. We're talking with Anoka County, which is probably one of the more conservative counties in the state, and they're thinking it's a great idea. It is something we are talking about.

**Buesgens:** I would definitely propose a safer streets program so that cars, trucks, bikers, walkers, children, pets are safe. We have serious issues. One of the questions I get asked about on the Council is 'What are we going to do about speeders? What are we going to do about these streets?' We can't ticket our way out of this problem. Besides, they're finding that tickets don't change behavior. What other cities have done is change the actual structures of the streets – bumpouts, narrower roads, solar-powered speed signs.

## **It seems the new waste disposal company's not performing well.**

## **What would you do going forward to fix this issue?**

**Buesgens:** Last Monday at the City Council meeting, our public works director Kevin Hansen sat down with Waste Management. They are looking at liquefied damages. We have leverage where they can get fined for not conducting business as they should. There should not be blocks that are missing [pickup]. On Friday afternoon I was out in the neighborhoods and I ran into Jesse [Davies] and the manager from Waste Management. They were following the trucks; they were taking inventory. They're on it. I asked them what happens if they don't improve their performance. We have to go out and get bids from a different company, which can be tricky.

**Schmitt:** It is almost impossible to find somebody in the middle of a contract. Kevin said, 'If we fire somebody, who's going to pick up the garbage the next day?' We need to have that in place. We want to make this work; the company wants to make it work. We are doing the best we can. We presented them with a list of items they needed to improve. They have talked to their drivers, retrained them to see what they should be picking up, what they can leave behind. They have four trucks that go out every day. Two garbage trucks, the recycle truck and the organics pickup. If one of those trucks breaks down, they have to let the city know.

## **Do you support the current school bond referendum?**

**Schmitt:** I agree with Sean. My research isn't done. I've been trying to reach out to the committee. Two members of the school board have contacted me and would like to meet with me. But at this point, my research isn't done, my decision hasn't been made. This is a great question that you need to ask of the school board candidates coming up to the primary. I'll give my opinion later, but not at this point.

**Buesgens:** I support the school bond. I supported it the last time. Education is the bedrock of our democracy. Our children deserve to be educated the best they can be because they're going to be the ones out getting jobs, they're going to be paying our taxes, they're going to be paying Social Security, they're going to be taking care of us. All children deserve a good education. They also deserve to have a good, healthy learning environment that is safe. At North Park, there are serious issues about safety for not only getting into the school but special education, the kids with special needs, that door cannot be opened because it's right next to their classroom. Some people say, 'They're not our kids.' Last winter there was an article in the Tribune. Parents have erased district lines. Everybody is educating everybody else's kids. It's a totally different ballgame with school choice.

## **What areas of the city would you like to see revitalized?**

**Buesgens:** One area is 37th and Stinson, the strip mall. That area is ripe for redevelopment. I was on the comprehensive steering committee for 40th and Central. One of the areas is the northeast quadrant with the old strip mall in there. I would love to see that redeveloped. I think we can do a prettier, nicer downtown. Plus, one-level strip malls don't bring in a lot of new tax revenue. The third area the staff is working to get grant money for is the southwest quadrant of 40th and University. It's covered with woods right now. It has serious mitigation issues and we need to get that shovel-ready.

**Schmitt:** We have a new store coming, a store that's going to bring in people from all over. We want our neighbors to look good. We want that commercial area to look good. We don't want them to shop at Hy-Vee and head home. We want them to stay and take a look at what else we have. The lower end of Central, let's get it going. We've done a lot with the upper end, the Fridley side. We need to start working down this way.

## **Where do you see Columbia Heights in five years, if you were mayor?**

**Schmitt:** When I first became mayor, I did a state of the city speech, and I said with our new council, our average age dropped down to the mid-fifties. I'm expecting in five years that the median age of the council will be even lower. We have a bunch of passionate residents here that want the best for our city. Community Grounds is doing multiple fundraisers for the schools. People have gone out and invented a sustainable group that hasn't been there before. We have the Lions working with multiple things. It's because residents want something new.

**Buesgens:** We're working right now with nine businesses with new signage, facades, lighting, security cameras to help Central Avenue be a safer place for people to come down and enjoy. I see a more vibrant community. I see more people walking, I see more people biking, more baby strollers and families moving in. I've seen a lot of great people doing a lot of great things. I want to see that continue, because I want to see Heights shine.

## **[from Oct. 3 Northeaster] by Cynthia Sowden and Margo Ashmore**

The Northeaster met with candidates Connie Buesgens and Donna Schmitt for mayor, and also attended the Sept. 20 forum where they appeared. Here are some of the insights we gained.

## **Connie Buesgens**

City Council member Connie Buesgens is tired of the insults. "I don't want to hear 'Crumbling Heights' anymore," she said. A Minnesota native (she grew up in Carver County), Buesgens is proud of her adopted city. If elected mayor, she wants Columbia Heights to "shine."

An avid gardener, she became known to folks at city hall when she began watering the potted plants in front of the building. "I'd visit the economic development department and say, 'Well, what about this?' or 'What about that?'" They suggested I apply for the planning commission. After a couple of years on the planning commission, it was suggested that she run for city council. "Last summer, people starting asking me to run for mayor. I decided to go for it."

She supports the proposed charter amendment to lengthen the mayor's term of

office to four years. "It's expensive to campaign, and I don't want the cost to limit who can afford to run. Most other cities have four-year terms. It would put Columbia Heights in the 21st century."

She sees some logic in placing the police department under the city manager. "If the city manager makes a poor choice, they can be fired right away. The mayor can only be 'fired' if they've done something illegal. If they make a poor choice, they get to stay around until their term is finished."

One of her priorities as mayor would be to build up Columbia Heights' business base while keeping its small-town feel. "Three areas are prime for redevelopment. One is 37th and Stinson where that old, run-down strip mall is, and 40th and Central. On 40th and University, there's a woods over there. The ground is contaminated, but once we find the money to clean that up, that's another area to redevelop. We can have three- or four-story buildings like Fairview, for instance. Fairview pays \$179,000 a year in city, county and school taxes. If we can get three or four more buildings like that, it brings in a lot more money for the city."

Another priority is to devise a plan to help young families stay in the city. "We have to do more to keep them here as their families grow," she said.

## **Donna Schmitt**

Donna Schmitt never expected to be elected Columbia Heights mayor in 2016. "I was surprised. I really expected Gary [Peterson] to win," she said. Now, she's the incumbent facing a serious challenge from Connie Buesgens.

She's running again because she feels a need to finish projects that are in motion. "I'd like to see Hy-Vee come up. It's going to be a huge boost to our economy and to our city, a blessing to everyone who wants to walk to a grocery store again. It'll be a draw for people in the surrounding communities, too."

City Manager Walt Fehst is retiring at the end of the year, and she'd like to take part in the selection of a new city manager. She would like to be involved in the re-do of 40th Avenue between Central and University. She's also interested in a new City Hall, whether it's a complete remodel of the existing building or a new building in another location. "I think it's a good possibility in the next five years," she said.

She's been encouraged by discussions with council newcomers at meetings and she'd like to serve two more years, then pass her position on to someone else. Once a proponent of a four-year mayoral term, Schmitt now thinks a two-year term is OK. "As an incumbent, you have an advantage because you are the mayor. With a two-year term, if the mayor isn't doing a good job, we can kick him or her out. It keeps you on your toes. I don't think anyone coming in expects to be here for life. You probably won't see 50 years in [office] for most people."

She discussed, with other mayors, the placement of the police department under the city manager. "The mayor does not run the police department on a day-to-day basis. That's not what it means. The mayor is not a sworn peace officer. It was an honor to work with HR and pick Lenny Austin as police chief." She would leave the police department under the mayor's supervision.

Schmitt said Columbia Heights' biggest challenge is money. She said, "We have great ideas, like City Hall, but we have to be patient and wait. Every year we do a budget, and every year there's an increase. Things get more expensive."

The city has two big challenges: The fire department would like to hire two more people to help with fire inspections, they're getting overwhelmed. It's an old city with old infrastructure—sewer, pipes, alleys. "The Public Works department divided the city into quadrants and rotated the years when they would fix things in a quadrant. Alleys were not included, and some of them have deteriorated badly. We need to go in and fix the worst of the worst and get them on our radar."

They were asked about the school bond issue. Schmitt said it's the voters choice, and the voters turned it down last time. Buesgens is for it, and mentioned that the kids at North Park can't spend much time in the school's library because of chemical odors from the cinder blocks.

[end]

# Heights Council candidates ready for forum

by **Cynthia Sowden**

Candidates for Columbia Heights mayor and two City Council seats will gather at Columbia Heights City Hall on September 20 to participate in a public forum. The forum starts at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. The *Northeaster* met with each to review their views about Columbia Heights. All expressed their love for the city, and the desire to listen to and serve their neighbors.

## Nelle Bing

Nelle Bing grew up in St. Paul, but she's become accustomed to Columbia Heights' small-town vibe. She and her husband moved to Columbia Heights four years ago. Her four-year-old daughter, Juliette, attends a Spanish immersion Pre-K program at Sheridan Elementary.

"We've laid our stakes in Columbia Heights," she said. "We purchased our first home here and it felt like our family was grounded. When Juliette gets older, she'll look back and say, 'Columbia Heights is my hometown.'" She feels people her age (32) are underrepresented in the Heights.

Armed with a degree in business administration and accounting, she's ready to tackle the challenges of city hall. It's a background she says will help her in understanding and communicating about the city's finances. "I understand what operates at the city level."

One of her passions is the parks. "Columbia Heights has 15 parks in 3.5 square miles. These parks are perfectly placed throughout the city. They're underutilized. We have opportunities to use Lomianki and Sullivan Lake. Events there would pull in people from other neighborhoods that might not show up for something at Huset or Circle Terrace."

Pedestrian safety is another key interest. "We are a throughway from downtown to the highways," she said. "It's more than just sidewalks. It might be a speed trailer, flashing stop signs that tell when a car is approaching."

She said the mayor's term should be four years. "A two-year term for mayor does not give them a chance to get integrated into getting to know the city departments, city workers. Running for a position is work. You start planning your run a year ahead of the election. For a mayor or council member to prepare to run, get elected and then turn around and prepare to run again seems a little frivolous to me. Council members have four-year terms, why not the mayor?"

Bing said she is still researching her position on who the police force should report



to, but is leaning toward the city manager.

Thoughts on improving the city: "As Columbia Heights continues to grow, houses are getting snatched up," she said. "We need to make sure we have affordable housing. The city needs to continue to invest in the school district. I would also like to see more investment in Central and University Avenues. Most residents go out of Columbia Heights for jobs. It would be wonderful to see more opportunities for jobs in Columbia Heights."

## Kt Jacobs

These days, former flight attendant Kay "Kt" Jacobs has her eyes focused on an earth-bound goal, a seat on the Columbia Heights City Council. Jacobs, who retired two years ago after a 16-year career with Northwest and Delta Airlines, served as master executive chair of the flight attendants' employee assistance program. That assignment led her to spend a great deal of time in Washington, DC, where she met with elected representatives and demonstrated on behalf of her constituents. Her civic experience was limited by her job – she was home only three days a week – but she gained a substantial background in management and volunteer service. She is self-employed as a substance abuse counselor.

Her work experience has given her "the ability to multitask and to look for the best solution for a problem," she said. "I have been able to work with a lot of different people and personalities."

A 24-year resident of Columbia Heights, Jacobs wants to see improvements along the "lower" end of the Central Ave. business corridor and wants to find new ways to bring businesses into Columbia Heights to lower the tax burden on residents.

"I think there's been too much special-interest activity among members of the council instead of listening to the community at large," she said.

On changing the mayoral term: "I am against the changes. Voters have far more control over an ineffective mayor with a 2-year term; there is no recent or documented history of mayoral abuse or improprieties to justify the change. When asking the few proponents that I have encountered what the basis of their support was, I have not received any reason for the support beyond a reference to an inadequate learning curve upon taking office....You do not change a city's constitution because of a personal dislike of any specific elected official. Those decisions are made at the poll



when you cast your vote for a candidate."

On changing the oversight of the police department, Jacobs said inappropriate action of an elected mayor can currently be terminated by the vote of the people in less than a two-year period, far more efficiently than getting rid of a city manager. "Maintaining the oversight with the mayor keeps the power with the voters, not with a contract and union-protected city employee."

## John Murzyn, Jr.

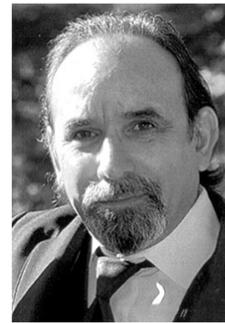
When John Murzyn, Jr., retired in 2014 after 38 years of service with the City of Columbia Heights, he thought he'd pursue his hobby of fixing old cars. Instead, he ran for City Council. "The city was always good to me," he said. "This way, I can give back."

A Columbia Heights native, he graduated from Columbia Heights High School in 1974 and began working in the Public Works department shortly afterward. He served as foreman of the sewer and water team for 14 years before retiring. It gave him an intricate knowledge of the city's infrastructure that he finds helpful when the council considers purchasing equipment or needs to make street improvements. "When you've walked in the footsteps and done it, you know what the streets and alleys need and what equipment works best. I feel my experience helps the residents because we don't buy something we don't need."

Asked about the proposed charter amendment to place the Police Department under the supervision of the city manager, he said, "I think it should be up to the people. The council shouldn't make a decision like that." In similar fashion, he also believes the people should decide whether the mayor should serve a two- or four-year term.

"Columbia Heights is such a diversified city, you can't be blind to one person and open up to another. You've got to talk to them, listen to them and try to help them as best you can. I take one person at a time."

His priority for Columbia Heights is the completion of the Hy-Vee store. "I'm lost without a grocery store," he said. His next priority is to hold the city's property taxes as low as possible. "The city, county and school taxes really hit a lot of people hard last year," he said. "I want everybody to live comfortably and have a good life in Columbia Heights."



## Nick Novitsky

Nick Novitsky is well aware that he sits on the City Council by appointment and not by election. That's something he wants to change on Nov. 6.

He lost the previous election by 124 votes, but after Donna Schmitt was elected mayor, he interviewed and was selected from a field of 17 candidates to fill her council seat. "It's never out of my mind, that I was not elected," he said. He hopes his door-knocking campaign gives him greater recognition.

A Columbia Heights resident since he was two years old, Novitsky is an active member of the community. He's president of the Lions Club, an athletic booster, head of the Jamboree committee and host of the Twin Cities Walk for Apraxia, a neurological disease that affects children. (The Walk will take place at Sullivan Lake on September 22.)

"I've been involved in a lot of things my whole life and I feel like I'm making a difference," he said. As a council member, he wants to keep the taxes in line and bring the community together. "Whenever I commit to do something, I go at it full-heartedly. I have no personal agenda, but to listen to residents and make the changes in the city that will bring everyone together."

He sees jobs and housing as big issues for the city. "I am for affordable housing; I'm not for the TIF financing, that's well documented. The school referendum seems to be the biggest divide in the city. People have to learn how to have discussions again and at the end of the discussion, we're all still friends."

"I believe the mayor's term should stay at two years. It gives the voters a chance to change the majority every election cycle. If the residents don't like what the council has been doing, three of us can be changed. That keeps the most power with the people." He believes the Police Department should report to the mayor, for accountability to the people as well.

He'd also like to see more businesses in the Heights. "We're heavily residential. We need businesses to increase the tax base. Residents are taxed out."

He attributes the Heights' success as a city to volunteerism, citing higher attendance at various events, and getting people to sit down and talk about something in which they have common ground. "Focus on food and children, and you'll get to know your neighbor."



# District 13 school board (Columbia Heights)

by **Gail Olson**

There are three openings on the District 13 (Columbia Heights) School Board. The field includes three incumbents: Hala Asamarai, who works as an instructional specialist; Molly Lewis, a social worker for Hennepin County; and Laura Palmer, a custom art framer. The challengers are Janet Kendall, Mike Novitsky and Joanna Stark. Army veteran Kendall is retired. Gauthier was a fleet maintenance manager. Kendall worked in account management. Novitsky owns an auto recycling company. Stark works full time and is a parent volunteer for sports and scouting groups.

The Columbia Heights School Board is comprised of six members who serve alternating four-year terms. Elections are held every two years.

Following are the candidates' e-mail responses to five Northeaster questions: 1) How long have you lived in Columbia Heights? 2) Do you have children in the district? 3) Your education 4) Current employment 5) Why are you running?

**Hala Asamarai** was elected in a 2016 special election and is now running for her first full four-year term. She has been a Columbia Heights resident for 18 years. One of her children recently graduated from the district, and another will be a freshman at the high school in the fall. Asamarai has a bachelor's degree in physiology, a master of arts degree in teaching, and an education doctorate in instructional leadership with a focus on education technology. She has a teaching license in life science for grades 9 through 12 and an administrative license as a K-12 principal. She is an instructional specialist for Minneapolis Public Schools.

Asamarai wrote that she is running again because she has found great fulfillment in serving on the school board and is excited about using her experience, expertise and passion to make a difference in students' lives. Her priorities, she said, include "making sure all of our students get equitable opportunities for success; closing the achievement gap while challenging and supporting all our students;

maintaining transparency in our work, so we can appropriately involve stakeholders; and listening to the voices of all students, families and community members."

**Janet Kendall** is a Columbia Heights High School graduate who has lived in Columbia Heights for more than 25 years. Her grandchildren, she wrote, "have been in the district but this fall are going to another district." Kendall focused on business classes in high school and after the Army worked in "office/account management" until retiring in 2015. She is running for school board, "because I want to see a quality education for all youth at our schools. With graduation rates at 83 percent or so, I don't feel that is good enough. Low test scores in math and reading, we need to do a lot better."

Kendall added that she does not feel there is clear communication between the district and the community. "Decisions are made prior to school board meetings with very little discussion if any, happening before the votes." Bullying, harassment, physical assaults and classroom disruptions should not be tolerated by anyone, Kendall added. She has suggested that the board "reach out to other surrounding districts for advice/suggestions to improve in all these areas. We cannot continue business as usual. I want to see a thriving district again."

**Molly Lewis**, elected in 2014, is running for a second term. She has lived in Columbia Heights for more than 31 years. She has four children. One son recently graduated from Columbia Heights High School. In the fall, two sons will attend the high school and a daughter will attend Columbia Academy. Lewis, also a Heights graduate, earned a bachelor of science degree in criminal justice from Winona State and has completed several master's level courses in social work at the University of Minnesota and the University of St. Thomas. She has worked for Hennepin County since 2000 and is a social worker in the parent support outreach program. Lewis is running "because I believe that Columbia Heights Public Schools need leadership who understand

children from diverse backgrounds as well as varying strengths and capabilities." She said that her personal and professional life experiences have given her "some unique perspectives that I am able to utilize as a board member. It is my hope that our schools will continue to have strong academic programs and activities and that our community will support all of our learners."

**Mike Novitsky** has lived in the Columbia Heights school district for 42 years. He does not currently have children in the school district, but both of his children graduated from District 13 and he has two granddaughters now attending school in the district. His son, Nick Novitsky, is a Columbia Heights City Council member.

Novitsky graduated from a Minneapolis high school and attended Minneapolis Vo-Tech, where he received certification in auto mechanics. He owns and operates an auto recycling company. In addition, he works at a private Jewish school in St. Paul as a facility manager. The building, he added, also houses a charter school.

He is running for a school board seat because he wants "to bring back parent involvement with the children and make the district responsible for the funding that they get from the taxpayers." He also would like to see "hometown students with less open enrollment."

**Laura Palmer** is running for her third term. She has lived in Columbia Heights for 26 years and has two children in the district, one at Columbia Academy, the other at the high school. She also has two grown children who attended Columbia Heights schools from 1991 through 2007.

Palmer attended the College of DuPage, an Illinois community college, and works as a custom art framer for Aaron Brothers at Michael's Arts and Crafts. She is running because "It has been a remarkable experience to serve on the school board these last seven years. I am running to promote the district and all it has to offer for our students, family, and the community. Election season is an excel-

lent platform to 'get the word out' and hopefully encourage all at the table to work together. There are amazing things happening in our six buildings, and of course, challenges.

"The next board, as always, will have to navigate the wants and needs and make tough, and often, heartbreaking decisions," Palmer added. "There is a great deal of complexity to school finance, regulations, mandates and court opinions that must be taken into account and navigated in a manner that least disrupts the classroom."

**Joanna Stark** is a Columbia Heights schools alumnus who has lived in the city for 28 years. She has "children who attend two out of the five public schools in Heights." Stark went to Hennepin Technical College and is currently employed. "It has been delightful to work a full-time job for seven years, at one of the best companies around," she wrote. Stark was a soccer coach and now volunteers with Girl Scouts and Cub Scouts.

"My role as a board member would center on serving all of the children in our community. We are a diverse community and we have to celebrate that diversity! Our schools should serve the educational needs of all the children. If elected I will bring to the table an obligation to be attentive and pay attention to the parents, children, and community members pertaining to their wants and educational needs. I will work diligently to earn back the trust and to retain the trust of the parents, children and community members. I will strive for transparency, accountability along with zero tolerance for bullying, harassment, assaults and incorporate a strategic discipline system within our schools."

Candidate contact information is available on the Minnesota Secretary of State website, <https://candidates.sos.state.mn.us/>. Put "School Board Member (ISD #13)" in the "office title" box, and click on the individual names to view their contact info. The Columbia Heights school district's website is [www.colheights.k12.mn.us](http://www.colheights.k12.mn.us).