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FEATURED

## Mayor George Wimmer looks back at successful 12 year tenure as mayor

Tiffany Kafer Dec 19, 2018 Updated Dec 19, 2018



The cities of Cambridge and Isanti came together for the first Two Cities, One Community event held Oct. 3, 2015. Pictured are Isanti Mayor George Wimmer, Cambridge Mayor Marlys Palmer and Rep. Brian Johnson.

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Coming from military family, the idea of service has always been a dream for Isanti Mayor George Wimmer, and at the end of his era as mayor, he looks back at what got him to the dais as well as the things he's accomplished while in his position.

"I've always wanted to serve in the military, but due to my four brain operations, suffering from a stroke and becoming paralyzed, that wasn't an option for me," Wimmer said. "I started trying to find other ways to serve; I've taught religious education for 28 years, I've volunteered for all types of organizations. When I first moved to Isanti in 2001 I began looking for opportunities within the community. In 2003 I began volunteering with the Jaycees and became president of the group from 2003 to 2004."

It was through that group that Wimmer got involved in the bike-walk trail, which was at that time still in its development stages.

"I volunteered on the bike-walk trail board and became co-chair with Bill Carlson," Wimmer said. "We were able to get the bike-walk trail completed, which was a huge accomplishment; it also sparked my interest to join the Isanti Park and Recreation Board in 2003."

Once exposed to city government through the Park and Recreation Board, Wimmer decided to go even further with his commitment to local government, and in 2004 he put his name in the hat for Isanti City Council.

"I decided to run for council — my background is in finance and operation control so I thought the position would be a great way for me to help within the community," Wimmer said.

After a successful election, Wimmer took on a two-year term on Isanti City Council before deciding to embark on the journey to becoming mayor.

"The council, at that time, had a lot of philosophical differences on how the city's finances should be handled, and the budget put together for 2006 was at a 40 percent increase in spending, which I thought was too much," Wimmer said. "I ran for mayor in 2006, and upon being sworn in, the first thing we started doing was conserving cash because I believed the city was on very shaky ground."

Wimmer explained at the time he was elected the city had financed a lot of development through debt, and with \$9.1 million of net debt for the city, he was right.

"It was a ridiculous amount of money, so I started going through, attempting to conserve cash and get that net debt paid down," Wimmer said. "At that time we were starting to see the first signs of the recession, but it really hadn't hit yet. When the recession was later in full swing in 2009, the city's actual tax base was the highest due to a two-year lag with valuations. A lot of cities then fell into the

trap that 'hey, now we are able to fund a lot of things.' We did the exact opposite and decided we needed to preserve that cash and be prepared because the bottom's going to fall out, and it certainly did."

When the city began feeling the full effects of the recession, they were ready, according to Wimmer. Due to the planning and conservation of cash, the city was able to continue funding all needed services as the state continued to cut local government aid in half and as homes went into foreclosure.

Being able to come out of the recession on solid ground and not having to need to increase the city's debt was a victory for Wimmer and the city as a whole. From that point forth, city finances have taken a turn for the positive, and as a result it's been great for homeowners within the city as well.

"Most of the public never sees the real details in all of the work that's done behind the scenes," Wimmer said. "There were about 100 different detailed things that weren't being done before that we ensured to do, then protecting the city as well as individual property owners as well."

Coming out of the recession, the focus for the city was on economic development.

"I've always believed that commercial and industrial growth is the key to the city of Isanti," Wimmer said. "Isanti has always traditionally been a bedroom community, and you need to be able to have that commercial-industrial growth in order to provide jobs and services, along with tax base, which will then lower the property taxes and allow for more opportunities for people to work in the local area."

With the addition of numerous commercial and industrial businesses during Wimmer's time as mayor, that tax base has continued to grow, jobs within the city have increased and the population is flourishing.

"When first elected I put out the goal to get an additional 1,000 jobs within the city," Wimmer said. "I thought I'd have a little more time to do it, but we got there. Once the hotel and Kwik Trip are completed, we will have added over 1,000 jobs within the city."

The change in dynamic with the additional jobs and businesses within the city has helped to make the city a more attractive place for further development, according to Wimmer.

“That change in dynamic has made the city of Isanti so much more attractive to restaurants looking to come in, other service industries and retail businesses,” Wimmer said. “When you’re bringing that many people into such a concentrated area, like the city of Isanti, it opens up so many more doors for more commercial ventures as well.”

Ever Cat Fuels LLC is one example of businesses that were attracted to the city of Isanti due to the changes being made during Wimmer’s time as mayor.

The heavy investment into the city economic development plan and the drive to grow the city’s industrial area resulted in business growth within the city.

“We looked at a lot of businesses that would be a good fit for the city of Isanti,” Wimmer said. “We tried to grow the awareness of the city of Isanti; not that many people really knew about the city of Isanti and our goal was to show that we were open for business and looking for businesses that fit with our area.”

From the industrial standpoint, Wimmer explained the goal was to attract businesses that were clean and green technology.

“We didn’t want businesses that would add pollution issues or traffic issues, we didn’t want anything along the line that would detract from the standard of living,” Wimmer said. “We wanted businesses that would provide good paying jobs.”

With Ever Cat Fuels LLC, a whole industry was exposed to the city of Isanti, and according to Wimmer, that was one of the greatest industries that could’ve come into the city.

“Ever Cat Fuels technology was developed down at the University of Minnesota and Augsburg College and was one of those Minnesota miracle type things,” Wimmer said. “It was created there, developed there, and in the end came to the city of Isanti, despite us being in competition with a number of other cities.”

Having Ever Cat Fuels LLC come into the city of Isanti, and the work done between them and the city, resulted in the city’s first Economic Business Recruitment Award from the Economic Development Association of Minnesota.

Alongside the recruitment of Ever Cat Fuels LLC, the addition of SnoBear USA to the city was another industry to bring pride to Wimmer, and recognition to the city.

“We are the home of SnoBear USA, within the city of Isanti every SnoBear is built here,” Wimmer said. “Again, bringing in good jobs, putting us on the map with a whole new category of people that didn’t know Isanti existed. There’s just so many of those types of businesses that we have here. Getting these different niche businesses into Isanti opens us up to a whole bunch of new people coming here.”

The No. 1 track in the country, Isanti’s Rum River BMX, has also helped in the city’s positive growth throughout Wimmer’s time as mayor and is one of the organizations he prides himself on being a part of.

“The BMX facility, the indoor arena, allowed us to have more people coming into the city, especially over those winter months,” Wimmer said. “During my first year as mayor the council gave a goal of having a hotel, a pharmacy and a clinic. In order to get the hotel we had to do something to boost up that gap period within the winter; the BMX track did that.”

Wimmer has worked with the Rum River BMX for over a decade, with their first meeting in 2004 before he was even on council.

“We began working with them when I was on the Parks and Recreation Board because they had a goal of improving the track and eventually becoming an indoor facility,” Wimmer said. “Over that 10-year period of time, our relationship was building and they were steadily becoming one of the best tracks in our region. We put together an agreement with them that the city would build the (facility) and they would have a long-term lease on the building. It’s made them the No. 1 track in the country for three years in a row now because they are able to be open year-round; it’s also opened the door for the city to bring in the new hotel.”

With families and racers coming from other states to race on Isanti’s BMX track, more people are coming to town during the winter months, making the hotel a reality for the city.

Along with the addition of the hotel, the city has also been able to work alongside Allina Health to bring in a clinic to the city.

“This is the first time since the mid-’50s that there’s been a full-time doctor in the city of Isanti; we went from the 1950s to 2016 without full-time doctors in our city,” Wimmer said. “Now, the Isanti clinic is the No. 1-rated clinic in the entire Allina chain of clinics.

“It’s these next generation projects, like Allina and also Coborn’s, that are continuing to set Isanti up to attract businesses that are of a high quality, with good paying jobs. It’s really taken Isanti from being one of the poorer cities in the region for household income to now the highest,” Wimmer added.

It’s the growth of the community, attracting families to the community and making living affordable that have always been on the forefront of Wimmer’s tenure. Driving the tax base up while taxes go down for property owners has motivated him over the past 12 years, and as he leaves his seat as mayor of the city, he hopes the trends continue.

“We’re a young city, an affluent city, and we have high standards that should help to maintain our positive growth,” Wimmer said.

In order to continue attracting families to the area and steer Isanti in a positive direction, Wimmer, along with the city, has also focused efforts on park land and community engagement through the development of land as well as community activities.

“We’ve expanded our park system over the years – there’s been a 67 percent increase in our park land within the city,” Wimmer said. “Legacy Park and the River Bluff Preserve are two projects I’m really proud we completed during my time as mayor. They add a tremendous amount to the quality of life in Isanti, allowing more access to the Rum River, a community garden, miles of hiking trails, and we’re protecting our city by developing these areas.

“Over the years we’ve made significant changes in staffing, operations and within the city that have allowed us to grow and become a successful city,” Wimmer added. “We’ve seen a decrease in taxes. We’ve got the No. 1 school resource officer in the state. We are the sixth safest city out of the 853 in the state. We’ve done everything we can to improve the city, and if the council stays on track with our long-term plan, taxes will continue to decrease for homeowners and our city will continue its positive growth.”

After putting forth thousands of hours to the city, development, residents, staff and the city’s struggles and successes, Wimmer finds himself at the end of an era and hoping for the best for his staff and the city he will continue to call home.

“I hope that the city can continue to build on our successes. There’s excellent infrastructure in place from an organizational standpoint, modernized facilities and utilities along with processes that have been put in place, to ensure we have the best and most efficient delivery system for city services

that we can," Wimmer said. "I look forward to continuing being engaged in local government and volunteering with local groups within the community in hopes to makes sure the city is still as successful. I come from a family of service, and I intend on continuing on with that."

### **George's lasting impact**

"Mayor Wimmer provided the steady leadership and financial expertise that helped bring the city of Isanti out of the Great Recession stronger and in position to grow responsibly. His leadership style demanded excellence from city staff and he worked hard to achieve development goals defined by the City Council and EDA. Coborn's Marketplace (including a pharmacy), Allina Health Clinic and the Best Western Plus hotel are cornerstone projects that have changed the landscape of Isanti forever and provide numerous employment opportunities within the community. In order to make great things happen you need strong and steady leadership; Mayor Wimmer has served admirably in that capacity."

### **~ Sean M. Sullivan, Isanti economic development director, March 2010 to August 2018**

"Mayor Wimmer created the opportunity for me to be able to fulfill a childhood dream of being a police officer in the city I grew up in. I am deeply grateful for his support with many of the ideas and opportunities I would bring forward in my position as school resource officer. He always allowed me to be heard and took careful consideration in his answers to my questions. I enjoyed challenging him and in turn enjoyed the challenges he presented to me. He accomplished a lot of great things for the city of Isanti and never hesitated to shed a spotlight on an employees' success. I know him as a mayor and as a father. He has left an impression on me as both. Thank you, Mayor Wimmer."

### **~ Isanti School Resource Officer Adam Gau, Isanti Police Department**

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