

Rapids Mayor Leads League

Jerry Deschane, Executive Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities

As a Wisconsin Rapids native, Zach Vruwink lived through the painful transition of a changing industrial economy. This central Wisconsin city had been a successful pulp and papermaking community for over a century, but in the early 2000s it faced dramatic headwinds as digital substitution reduced demand for the paper produced there. Thousands of jobs were lost, families moved to seek employment opportunities elsewhere, and a corporate headquarters was moved overseas as two area mills closed. General community attitudes about the future were bleak, at best. The general consensus of Vruwink's high school peers was to not just move away for college after high school, but to move and not return.

"But I didn't feel that way. I saw a lot of untapped potential, and I wanted to be a part of that regrowth. There were a number of residents and small business owners who came together under the "Community Progress Initiatives," and we focused on building our local economy back up by celebrating the community's history and highlighting the arts of the area. I jumped in and started my own business." Vruwink was 15 when he started a computer business in one of Wisconsin Rapids' many vacant downtown storefronts. Soon after, he enrolled in college at nearby University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point while he continued to grow the business, which by now had retail locations in Wrightstown, Iola, Plover, and Wisconsin Rapids. He became active in downtown revitalization efforts, business groups, and served on the boards of community organizations. He graduated in 2010 with a BA in Political Science, Public Administration and Policy Analysis.

Mayor Vruwink's public career began shortly after his college graduation. During the summer of 2011, the incumbent mayor announced her retirement from the position. The young entrepreneur had attracted attention, and he found community members asking if would consider running for mayor. "It was an honor," Zach reported, "But, I wondered if the city was ready for a 24-year-old mayor. To my surprise, as I went door to door, residents affirmed it was time for my ideas and energy to lead city government."

He was elected in 2012 in a four-way general election with 69 percent of the vote and has been re-elected ever since. His priorities, unchanged from his days as the creator of a new business, include investment in the city's "core" waterfront



district, infrastructure, and quality of life amenities that would attract and retain talent, a challenge for the city.

The mayor has moved the city to where its residents are – online and active on social media. City residents can now use a smartphone app to report neighborhood concerns and potholes. He has also recommended priority investments in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which are being utilized by residents and city staff in the field.

Building on Wisconsin Rapids' untapped economic potential has continued to be a priority. Vruwink has worked to address the city's economic competitiveness at every turn; from addressing infrastructure needs to realizing its recreational potential through riverfront renewal, a new aquatic center and reinvesting in parks and the city zoo. [See September edition of *The Municipality*]

"Investments in 'place' play a critical role in attracting the talent that employers need alongside the basic infrastructure they come to expect." That focus on place caught the eye of Matalco, a Canadian aluminum manufacturer, which just broke ground on an \$80 million plant that will employ 80 people. And the opportunities continue.

Vruwink intends to bring that energy, vision, and optimism to his work as leader of the League, an organization that has helped him connect with his peers. "I can't imagine having been a new local leader without the League," he said. "The high-quality events put on by the League are not to be missed

by the most seasoned or the newbies. I enjoy telling the story of Wisconsin Rapids – its challenges and opportunities when meeting with our federal and state representatives. Without the League, some of these opportunities would be less or non-existent.”

Looking forward to 2020, the mayor says it will be a year of focus for the League. “Our advocacy efforts will be focused on local government finance. We want to use the upcoming 2020 campaign season to call attention to the fact that Wisconsin’s property-tax-only system of funding local government is a 19th Century relic. That relic is not suitable for the dynamic new economy of the 21st Century; a new economy that Mayor Vruwink is determined to bring to his home town. “I’m as passionate about the potential of Wisconsin Rapids and other Wisconsin cities and villages as I was at the beginning of my career. We just need the right tools to do the job, and to do that, we will rely on the League to make our case to the Legislature and governor.”

Another strategic direction of the 2020 League will be to promote inclusivity and diversity in all of its formats; age, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. “Wisconsin has always been a diverse state, and we’re going to become more so in the next few years. Large cities and small villages that want to succeed will embrace that diversity and celebrate it as an economic strength.”

Vruwink recognizes that diversity brings challenges along with its opportunities, and he will work with other League leaders to ensure that the League continues to be a resource and a sounding board for both incumbent and new local officials. “Let’s face it, running for and participating in local office is not for the faint of heart,” he says. “The League’s Local Government 101 training, the annual conference, regional meetings, and online training will be even more important in the future. I am honored to have been elected to the position of League President for 2020, and I pledge to my fellow local leaders that I will listen, engage, and work with them. It’s going to be a great year.”



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Buelow Vetter is Growing Stronger



From left to right: Attorneys Mary S. Gerbig, Lisa M. Bergersen and Saveon D. Grenell.

Buelow Vetter Buikema Olson & Vliet continues to lead the way among municipal law firms with the addition of three high-caliber attorneys - Lisa Bergersen, Mary Gerbig and Saveon Grenell.

- Lisa is an experienced litigator with a wealth of experience in municipal law and labor and employment law. She has represented public and private sector employers for nearly 20 years, and she most recently served as the Human Resources Director for the City of Pewaukee.
- Mary has over 20 years of experience representing school districts, CESAs, and municipal employers throughout Wisconsin. She recently received the George Tipler Award for Distinguished Service in School Law. Her expertise in the areas of general school law and special education law is an exciting addition to Buelow Vetter's top-rated school law practice.
- Saveon's experience as an Assistant City Attorney for the City of Milwaukee and as attorney for Milwaukee Public Schools makes him another perfect addition to our team of experienced attorneys who provide legal services to schools, municipalities and corporations throughout the state.

Welcome to the team, Lisa, Mary and Saveon!

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