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The sun sets behind the Grant Town Hall in the Washington County community where a debate over road repairs has turned ugly.

Map: Pioneer Press

ROAD FEUD SPLITS GRANT//RESIDENTS OF THIS PASTORAL TOWN ARE HOTLY DEBATING WHO WILL PAY TO MAINTAIN ITS PAVED ROADS. THE POLITICAL NASTINESS HAS LED A STRING OF OFFICIALS AND PLANNERS TO STEP DOWN.

For a town of only 4,200 people, the turnover at Grant City Hall over the past two years has been startling: two mayors, three city clerks, two treasurers and more than a half-dozen planning commissioners.

Sex? Corruption? A juicy scandal?

Nope.

Roads.

Yes, roads -- and how much to spend on them -- have driven a wedge through Grant, a bucolic community dotted with horse and hobby farms just west of Stillwater in Washington County.

It seems an odd issue to divide a city. After all, some in Grant say, a well-functioning municipality should pay for major improvements to its paved roads. But others say imposing such work -- and raising taxes to pay for it -- is the first step toward suburban sprawl.

The quarreling sides are dug in, and meetings can be cantankerous. Tension and mistrust can be so high that it's difficult to find data everyone agrees on -- or information someone hasn't labeled as spin.

"I try to stay away from there," joked Washington County Commissioner Dennis Hegberg, whose district includes Grant. "Unless they call me, I won't come to them."

#### RURAL CHARACTER

Grant, with its horse farms and upper-income homeowners, is a community of independent types who value a low-tax, low-service government.

The city is wealthy, with a median income of \$98,000 and a median house value of \$247,000, according to 2000 Census data. New houses need a spread of at least five acres, though the average lot in Grant is twice that. The area also boasts several million-dollar houses.

Grant stands among the lowest-taxed cities in Washington County. The City Council meets in a former one-room schoolhouse, and the top staffer is a part-time city clerk. Everyone uses septic tanks and well water. And half the roads are gravel -- a favored road surface for many equestrians.

Those with paved roads here have long faced this city policy: Want major work done on the asphalt in front of your door? Pay for it yourself.

But in 2003, the City Council began to turn away from that idea. It considered chipping in for the repaving and rebuilding of paved roads.

Some council members pointed to one neighborhood, Indian Hills, which hadn't seen any major work on its 4 1/2 miles of asphalt since the developer put it in more than 30 years ago.

Roads "are falling apart," said former City Council Member Rick Vanzwol, a key proponent of the new paving policy.

#### TROUBLE OVER TAXES

To pay for such work, in June 2004 city officials proposed almost doubling its tax levy -- an eye-popping idea to many residents. Those living in median-valued houses, for example, would have seen their annual taxes jump from \$249 to \$468.

Vanzwol was voted off the council in November 2004, when a new majority was elected to the board. The board then cut the controversial paving proposals from the overall city road plan and kept the levy increase at just under 30 percent.

"It was a cost issue," Council Member Nancy Levitz said at the time of the cuts. Residents "didn't want us switching gears."

Yet, some residents have had a deeper worry -- that of being sucked into Twin Cities suburban sprawl. A city that imposes major road improvements on neighborhoods, they fear, is taking a first step toward sprawl.

Better roads equal more traffic equals more people -- all living on denser lots demanding more services, more equipment and more government, they say. That would create a "country club" Grant of town houses and less countryside.

"You open a door a crack or two, and it's open (for good)," said Brad Hinseth, who was elected to the City Council last month.

But Hinseth's critics say he and his allies are just being selfish and financially shortsighted.

"We're a town that needs to be a city," outgoing City Council Member Sharon Schwarze said. "Growing up doesn't mean more streets or more people. ... It means taking care of your assets."

#### MESSY BATTLES

With both sides adamant, things have gotten ugly, with each side claiming the other is pulling dirty tricks.

Several months after the November 2004 elections, the state slapped fines on Levitz and former Mayor Gary Erichson for their role in fliers that made false statements against candidates in the rival camp.

Then, city officials looked into, but never fully pursued, why the city's former volunteer Web site administrator -- the daughter of defeated Council Member Vanzwol -- deleted hundreds of files from the city's Web site after she'd left the job.

Council members have sniped at each other and accused each other of lying. Caught in the crossfire, a number of city employees and officials have jumped ship.

City clerk and treasurer Barbara Bartholdi resigned in May 2005 after four years, claiming an "openly hostile and antagonistic attitude" among City Council members had made her job impossible.

Another clerk, Karen Christiansen, stated the city "does not seem interested in

operating effectively nor appropriately in regards to their treatment of staff and/or volunteers."

Mayors also bailed. After being elected in November 2004, Tim Gangnon resigned in late August. His successor, David Schroeder, was appointed Sept. 5 and won the Nov. 7 election -- then resigned Nov. 30.

"There is no team spirit, no spirit of cooperation, only some personal agendas," Schroeder wrote in his resignation letter. "I'm tired of going to battle every day -- justifying things that don't need justification."

Of the 11 planning commissioners on board in 2004, seven of them -- including two successive chairmen -- have resigned or failed to be reappointed.

#### SETTLING DUST

So how long will the turmoil continue?

Hinseth said he thinks he'll see "more of a spirit of cooperation" on the new council because of the new elections.

The city is hiring another clerk, is considering whether to hire a treasurer and could appoint a new mayor as early as next month.

Though Hinseth said he sees no huge changes in the next two years, he says he's willing to discuss "new strategies" to fund the repaving of roads.

"I can't make people work together," he said. "I can only do my part."

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