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STILLWATER NO LONGER CALLS ALL SHOTS//NEW COTTAGE GROVE FACILITY IS LATEST SIGN OF EBBING INFLUENCE

Hey, Stillwater: It's not all about you anymore.

The seat of Washington County - jewel of the St. Croix River Valley and the "birthplace" of Minnesota - used to be the place to move and shake.

For decades, it was the hub of the county. Its scions hobnobbed with county leaders in St. Croix Valley society. Its share of tax money was the envy of others. And the area's historical standing gave it perhaps a sense of entitlement - what some still call "the Valley Syndrome."

But last week came an acknowledgment that the county's population has shifted to the outer towns and suburbs over the past 30 years - and with it went some political power.

On Monday, the first of two satellite government buildings opened in Cottage Grove to serve residents in the county's south. The second center will open up north in Forest Lake this fall.

"Stillwater is not the center of the universe anymore," joked Myra Peterson, county commissioner from Cottage Grove.

Such ribbing has gone on for years. Whether Stillwater really got more than its fair share may just be a matter of perception. Politicians say it's not really an issue anymore, but a few do remember the slights of long ago.

"It's jealousy," joked Commissioner Gary Kriesel, a former Stillwater City Council member.

Started in 1843, Stillwater is perhaps the closest thing to old money in Washington County. It's on the National Register of Historic Places, and its location as an 1848 territorial convention led it to claim the status of the state's birthplace.

It was a booming lumber center in its heyday, and its barons built mansions still visible today. For years, it was the county's largest city, and it has drawn power from having its courthouse, jail, sheriff and government officials all together.

Everybody who was anybody lived there, creating what some politicians call a good-ol'-boy network that heavily influenced politics and business.

It was a difficult network to crack, even as recently as the 1970s.

"You wouldn't be invited to the party or to the table," said County Commissioner Dennis Hegberg, a Forest Lake banker who found the Stillwater banking world closed to him when he started. "You had to be very aggressive to get in."

Dick Stafford, of Woodbury, recalled a bit of a snub after he was elected county treasurer in 1974.

One Stillwater bank president and fellow outsider hinted to Stafford that he'd never be invited to the city's social events.

Another told him he should take a cut in pay for the "privilege" of working in the valley.

And one Stillwater resident once asked him, "Where's Whittleberry?"

"I've kind of sat back and laughed at their arrogance," Stafford said.

True, the Stillwater area is represented by only one of five members of the county's Board of Commissioners. But Hegberg said it has held sway for decades.

For one thing, many of the county's main politicians and administrators used to come from Stillwater, as did the bulk of the county's work force.

Commissioners representing outlying areas allowed Stillwater and the valley to take a disproportionate share of county funding, Hegberg said, because they didn't want to disrupt the business and social ties they had with the area.

"I said, 'Hey, I've got county roads that are still gravel, and you're already fixing your (paved ones),' " he recalled. "I had to start arguing and being more aggressive about where tax dollars went."

Cottage Grove Mayor Sandy Shiely says she still senses some of that preferential treatment.

The Stillwater-St. Croix Valley area "hogs most of the political power," Shiely said. "I hear that from people. Most of the park dollars go there ... dollars for road repair... all those kinds of things. "

That's subject to debate. Peterson and Oakdale-based Commissioner Bill Pulkrabek say they don't see any pro-Stillwater bias for funding, and commissioners say most of the "Valley Syndrome" began dissipating 20 to 30 years ago.

Woodbury is now the bustling population and commercial center, with 54,000 residents, according to 2005 census figures. Cottage Grove has more than 33,000, Oakdale is third with 27,000.

Stillwater is practically tied with Forest Lake - Hegberg's territory - at about 17,400 people.

Pulkrabek said Stillwater's own population is changing, with new families diluting the concentration of old ones in town.

Still, "maybe (longtime Stillwater residents) feel more a part of the community than those who moved in five years ago," he said. "Maybe they have a deeper sense of ownership. I don't necessarily see that as a bad thing."

If there's one leftover of Valley Syndrome, it's in the centralization of the county's courts.

The government center in Stillwater will undergo a \$62 million expansion to its offices and courts over the next several years.

That comes after the county shuttered a satellite court in Forest Lake in 2005 to save money, and Cottage Grove will probably close its branch within a few years.

Judges insist a centralized court system in Stillwater would be more secure and efficient, and the county can't afford satellites.

"By law, (the courthouse) has to be in the county seat," said Washington County District Judge Susan Miles. "Stillwater is the county seat, so in the eyes of some, I guess it's still the center of the universe."

SERVICE CENTER IN COTTAGE GROVE

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