

# Watertown Area Now Magazine - Winter, 1995-1996

## Watertown Mayor - Brenda Barger



Watertown Mayor Brenda Barger is no politician. She's the mayor working to improve the city with the people in mind, not her own advancement.

"I have no other political aspirations. I'm doing what I want to do," Barger said. "This is not a stepping stone to anyplace. There's no big secret plan. I came here to help, and I enjoy what I do and want to continue to do that."

Barger is also not a pushover. As only the second female mayor in Watertown, she has taken some heat but still managed to get things done. The council and the voters were skeptical for her abilities at first, but as the year has passed, Barger has seen a change as the council has pulled together and support from voters has improved.

"It hasn't been unusual for voters, even women, to come up to me and say 'Gosh. When you first came into office I was kind of skeptical. I didn't know how I was going to like a woman. But you've proved yourself, and we appreciate that.' That means a lot to me," said Barger.

Female mayors in South Dakota are rare in comparison to other areas of the country, but Barger has found this to be an advantage because it attracts attention. This gives her a great deal of access that others in the office have not had. Another advantage is that most people are anxious to hear what she has to say. However, she knows she has to work a little harder.

"As a woman, I feel I have to run a little faster, work a little harder," Barger said. "You have to make sure that you know the issues and that you know your stuff because people would be a little more

critical perhaps if you don't."

Becoming mayor of Watertown has not had much of an effect on her family so far. Both of her children have gone to college or married and left home. She and her husband, Mike, have found themselves more or less passing in the night with her job and his Hy-Vee store in the process of expanding. Although acting as mayor is essentially a part-time job, it takes many hours to really make things happen for the community.

Barger originally got into city government because of water issues in the north part of Watertown. She felt they weren't being addressed properly so she ran for City Council. After one year on that council, former Mayor Howard Hopper approached her and mentioned to her to give some thought to running for mayor.

"It was a scary proposition. That is definitely outside your comfort zone. It's not a normal feeling when you put yourself out in front as a target," Barger said. "It's a real commitment, not just of time. There is an incredible amount of information that to do a really good job you need to know."

Being a hands-on person, Barger likes to be involved in different things. She understands her responsibility in dealing with the lives of almost 20,000 people. She is concerned with how the community functions, how people perceive the community, and how it grows and what direction it grows in.

Even with all the hard work involved, Barger loves her new job. One of her favorite parts is welcoming new people to Watertown and marketing the city. That, she says, is the easy part.

"Watertown sells itself. It's a clean, beautiful place that's pretty crime free compared to other places," said Barger. "I get to recognize people publicly who do special things or who come here for special reasons. I go into schools because it's important that kids see you. Why should they care if they vote or not if they don't know what that means to them?"

"Watertown is the envy of the entire region. I wouldn't be mayor of just anyplace," said Barger. "It's the positive attitude that people have, their willingness to try new things and invest in Watertown. And they pitch in when there is a need. People here are doers, and that's what I'm interested in."

*Written by: Renae Killion*