

## NORMANDALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE 1968 – 2018

# How Bloomington became the site of Normandale Community College

By Renee Ruhme McGivern

It's hard to imagine a time when there wasn't a Normandale Community College in Bloomington at the northwest corner of France Avenue and 98th Street. Yet when the Minnesota State Legislature first established the State Junior College System in 1963, the land at that corner was undeveloped, like a dream waiting to be fulfilled.

The need for junior colleges was becoming obvious in the 1960s as a large generation of students was starting to graduate from high school. There was a lot of optimism and faith in education as a pathway to a bright future for this new generation.

Before 1963, 11 communities in Minnesota had already built community colleges, an indication of how confident people were in higher education. Austin, Brainerd, Ely, Eveleth, Fergus Falls, Hibbing, Itasca, Rochester, Virginia, Willmar, and Worthington built community colleges with little support from the State of Minnesota.

The new junior college system energized many cities to vie for a new college. The legislature established a junior college board in 1964 to review all the proposals and possibilities for where community colleges would be built.

## Colleges in the suburbs a crazy idea

It's inconceivable today that legislators laughed at Joe Graw, the first state representative from Bloomington, when he introduced a bill in 1963 to build colleges in the suburbs. Thomas Ticen, Sr., was the other Bloomington state representative starting in 1967.

"People thought I was crazy because for 240 years, Minneapolis and St. Paul were the only places people in the metropolitan area could get a college degree," said Graw in a 2018 interview.

Legislators told him that "no one wanted to send

their kids to college in the suburbs."

The first attempt with the bill failed in both the House and Senate, and yet the idea was gaining public support. Suburbs were gathering data and facts to support a college in their cities.

The Bloomington City Council formed a Junior College Study Committee that played a significant role in getting a college located at the present site. Diane Darr, an active volunteer in the city, led the committee and vividly recalls everyone's enthusiasm.

"The idea that we could get a college right here was so exciting," said Darr. "And the idea that the state was taking over and wanting to do something with junior colleges was in itself an exciting thing."

When the bill was considered in the next session, the reaction was dramatically different. Public support had grown considerably since the previous session.

"There was 100% support for five suburban colleges the second time the bills went through the House and Senate," said Graw. Jerome Blatz was Bloomington's senator at the time.

The legislature followed that decision with instructions about where the schools should be built: In northwest Hennepin County, the northwest Anoka-Ramsey area, the southwest metropolitan area, and two in the Ramsey-Dakota-Washington area.

Darr recalls the extensive work of the committee to pull together a case for Bloomington.

"We had a huge groundswell of support from the city and school district, and we gathered data to support our position," said Darr.

According to Graw, the case for Bloomington was strong because there was undeveloped land at 98th and France. It was an ideal spot to build a school that



Joe Graw & Diane Darr in August 2018

could serve high school graduates from four or five cities.

In the end, the cities of Bloomington and Richfield were the final two competitors. They made presentations to the State Junior College Board in November 1965.

On January 21, 1966, the board announced that Bloomington would be the home of the southwest metropolitan area college. It would be located on the 90-acre site at the intersection of France Avenue and 98th Street.

## And then it was opening day

After two years of planning and construction, Normandale Community College opened on September 23, 1968. An astonishing 1,386 students had registered, some 500 more than administrators anticipated.

Darr perched herself at a corner near the school with her preschooler to watch students arrive on that first day. She wanted to witness the result of all that hard work on her first brick and mortar project.

"I sat there and cried," she said. "The school was there, it was happening, and it was so exciting."



With Governor Wendall Anderson (center), are the leaders who served Bloomington in 1971, three years after Normandale opened. From left to right is State Representative Thomas Ticen and Mayor James King, Senator Jerome Blatz and State Representative Joseph Graw.