MPR News | Minnesota Now Chonburi Lee elected first Hmong Mayor of Maplewood 01M6M5TDYMMHT89E5JSZ26MJHF

NINA MOINI: The Twin Cities northeast suburbs of Maplewood elected a new mayor last night, and it's a historic first for the city. Chonburi Lee received 58% of the vote, unseating incumbent Mayor Marylee Abrams, and making him Maplewood's first Hmong mayor. Lee is currently a member of the city council where he's served since 2023, and he joins me now. Congratulations on your win, Mayor-elect.

CHONBURI LEE: [CHUCKLES] Thank you so much for having me today. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Did that make you chuckle to hear "Mayor-elect?"

CHONBURI LEE: I think still-- my wife and I are like, is it a dream? Did we wake up? Is it a dream, or is it real? So I'm just incredibly honored and grateful and humbled for this opportunity that Maplewood residents have given me.

NINA MOINI: Your parents, I understand, their generation came to this country as refugees. You're becoming mayor of a city, again, where a significant portion of the population, 15% I'm seeing here, are Hmong folks or Hmong descent. I mean, what does this moment mean for you? What are you hearing from other folks?

CHONBURI LEE: Thank you for that. 38 years ago, I came to this country as a refugee. And I posted a picture a little while back with me holding my A-number-- my T-number sign. And I don't think my dad ever really imagined like, oh, someday this little guy's going to run for mayor of Maplewood. But I think what this says is that our community is changing. The dynamics of our community is changing, and Maplewood is ready for something different. And they're ready for the next chapter in Maplewood.

We have to have leaders that reflect the changing dynamics of our community. And that's-- a lot of young families are moving into the city of Maplewood, and we have to make sure that our priorities in the city of Maplewood are reflecting what families and friends are looking for in the city. So that's what I'm bringing to the table.

NINA MOINI: What do you want folks to know about Maplewood? We're across the region here, but Maplewood, it's really close to St. Paul, diverse population. What do you want people to know about the future of Maplewood? Where's Maplewood going?

CHONBURI LEE: Yes. I'm incredibly proud of the city of Maplewood. And I say this-- I really believe that we are the best city in Ramsey County. [LAUGHS] There's a lot of opportunities in the city of Maplewood. We're very built out. But I think where the opportunities are in the city is the redevelopment opportunity.

We have a lot of spaces that can use some touch up and some cleanup. And I want folks to look at us and see us. And I see Maplewood as a sleeping giant. And I hope that developers and entrepreneurs and business owners and homeowners, they see Maplewood as that opportunity so they can make Maplewood a part of their journey.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. You said that you sometimes-- during your campaign, you said that you sometimes have to drive your kids to other communities for activities, recreation. And as you think about just the growth of your area, what is it going to take? A lot of cities are really struggling with their budgets right now. A lot of folks feel like, here go my property taxes going up again. I just want my potholes filled. I mean, there's just so much to balance in your role. How are you approaching that?

CHONBURI LEE: Yeah, yeah. So I think that's a big piece of it. We can't do everything all in one day. We have to start somewhere. And that's something that Maplewood doesn't have right now, is we don't have the recreation programs here in the city.

And so I do drive my kids to Woodbury, to Oakdale, to Roseville. And then when we're-- nothing against the city program or anything at all, but because we're not residents of the city, we're second in line. They give priority to their residents.

When parents are in other cities, they're spending money in other cities. So we have to bring that here in our city. So maybe starting with a small program first. That way we can keep kids here in our city. And when parents are dropping their kids off for soccer or football, they're spending money and spending time in the city of Maplewood.

So I think that's a great way, is to start somewhere. And not doing anything at all is not going to get us anywhere at all. So I want to start somewhere with some sort of program in Maplewood.

NINA MOINI: Hmm. And I know you've been on the city council. And sometimes local politics will do coverage of really large cities more so. I want to know about that relationship there and how it is to be a councilor and then step into the mayorship role, and what you're hoping for for the future, as we wrap up here.

CHONBURI LEE: Yeah. I think there's a lot of opportunities to really build. And something that I worked really hard on the last few years-- not just the last few years, few years as a council member, but to really build relationships across the board at city levels, at the county level, and at the state level. I think Maplewood really has a place in this. And being the second largest city in the Ramsey County area, I want to make sure that we have our say in the work that goes on around Ramsey County and want to make sure that we also then get our portion and a piece of that.

And Maplewood, we do matter. Maplewood is not just a second city. We're a city that's growing, and we're a city that's changing. And we have to make sure that we have policies, and we have to make sure that we have voices and opinions at the table that reflects our community, the dynamics of it.

NINA MOINI: Just one last question. And we have about 30 seconds left. If folks are in Maplewood, where do they need to stop by?

CHONBURI LEE: [LAUGHS] There's a lot of great places in Maplewood. My favorite place in Maplewood-- so one thing that I would definitely recommend is Camilas Taqueria. They have the best taco, in my opinion, in Maplewood.

NINA MOINI: Oh, good.

CHONBURI LEE: Give that a shot. Support local businesses. You won't regret it.

NINA MOINI: Sounds good. Mayor-elect, thank you very much. Mayor-elect Lee, appreciate your time.

CHONBURI LEE: Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: Chonburi Lee is Maplewood's mayor-elect.