

MINUTES

RAMSEY COUNTY CHARTER COMMISSION

February 7, 2005

7:00 p.m.

The Ramsey County Charter Commission met on Monday, February 7, 2005 at 7:00 p.m. at Ramsey County Public Works, 1425 Paul Kirkwold Drive, Arden Hills, MN.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

District 1: Sharon Klumpp
James Speckman
District 2: John Gulbranson
District 3: Franklin Gurney
District 6: A. L. Brown
Tienne Otteson Linden
District 7: Bud Berry
At Large: Anthony Coletta
Michael Fratto

MEMBERS ABSENT:

District 2: Robert Bell
District 3: Charles Aguirre
District 4: Christopher Leifeld
District 5: Kristin Dawkins
District 7: Mary Nepper
At Large: Minoka Kitto

OTHERS PRESENT:

Ramsey County Commissioner Jan Wiessner
Dorothy McClung, Director, Property Records & Revenue
Joe Mansky, Elections Division
Mark Pettit, Sheriff's Department
Darwin Lookingbill, County Attorney's Office
Bonnie Jackelen, County Manager's Office
Victoria Dahlquist, Secretary

CALL TO ORDER:

Vice Chair Sharon Klumpp called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. with a quorum present.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

A MOTION was made, SECONDED and CARRIED to approve the minutes of the October 11, 2004, Charter Commission meeting.

CITIZEN INPUT/COMMENTS:

None.

STANDING COMMITTEE REPORTS:

Subcommittee #1 – Elected or appointed status of sheriff/county attorney offices

Other than County Commissioners, the sheriff and county attorney are the only two county positions that are currently elected. The subcommittee (Marc Asch, Frank Gurney and Tienne Otteson Linden) met on November 23, 2004 and went over a study conducted by Hamline University in December 1995 on this issue. The Sheriff has been elected since Minnesota became a state. Therefore, there will likely be strong opposition to a change of the status quo of both positions from the Minnesota Sheriff's Association and the Minnesota County Attorney's Association. The elected or appointed status of the Sheriff and County Attorney can be decided separately. Currently, if there were a vacancy in either position, a special election would be conducted. This is contrary to the other 86 counties in Minnesota in that those counties would appoint if either position became vacant.

Hennepin County attempted to change the elected status of the sheriff position in that county and it was rejected 6-4. The elected official has the ability to challenge budget or salary decisions made by the County Board on behalf of his or her department. All elected officials in the State of Minnesota have this option.

The study indicated that with an appointment, there is a larger pool of candidates from which to choose. With elected status, there is every possibility that the incumbent would remain in the position unchallenged until retirement. In addition, the standard for recalling an election is very high. The solution to this situation would perhaps be term limits on the positions.

This issue will be on the next Charter Commission agenda to allow members to read the Hamline University report and come to a decision as to how to proceed.

A.L. Brown said he is more interested in discussing the County Attorney position than the Sheriff's position.

Subcommittee #2 – Setting of County Commissioner Salaries

Sharon Klumpp reported that the subcommittee was not able to meet to discuss the County Commissioner salary issue. Terms of the other subcommittee members have expired and they are no longer Charter Commission members. Vice Chair Klumpp asked for volunteers to sit on this subcommittee and Bud Berry, A. L. Brown and Mike Fratto volunteered.

Vice Chair Klumpp stated that some comparative work was done and that it appears that some county commissioner salaries have lagged when compared to other metro counties. In addition, the duties of the position have changed over the years and include more responsibilities. The current salary for Ramsey County Commissioners is approximately \$60,000 and \$62,500 for the Chair and the positions are not specified as full or part-time. The County Commissioner salaries are set through an ordinance process.

This subcommittee will report at the May 2, 2005 Charter Commission meeting.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

None.

NEW BUSINESS:

Joe Mansky, from the Elections Division of the Property Records and Revenue Department, was present at this meeting to update the Commission members on elections information. 2004 was one of the more interesting election years. Because of the contentious presidential race, voter turnout was very high. Minnesota's average voter turnout over the last 30 years has been close to 70%. This past year, voter turnout was over 77%, a number reminiscent of turnouts in the 1950s when voter participation peaked.

St. Paul is a large part of Ramsey County and it is so different from the rest of the state. Those differences motivate some of the statistics. St. Paul's population and total registration peaked in 1960. In 1960, St. Paul was the 17th largest city in the United States; Minneapolis was the 11th largest. Today, St. Paul is much further down on that list. In 1960, St. Paul was not only a larger place than it is today, but it was a wealthier place. Looking at both the population and voter registration numbers, registration has been falling faster than the city's population. This is likely because over the years St. Paul has not only been getting smaller, but it has also been getting poorer.

In the very recent years, Ramsey County seems to have bottomed out as far as our voter participation is concerned and since 1997, voter registration numbers have been increasing to the point that they are close to the same level as in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the reasons are that Ramsey County's property values are up about 30% because people are moving into St. Paul who have not lived there before and are bidding up the price of land. These same people are more likely to be regular voters. Another factor is that St. Paul is a community with a very large immigrant population. Many of the newly arrived immigrants have become U.S. citizens and are beginning to vote. That these newly arrived citizens are registering to vote and their U.S. born children will also likely register and vote at age 18, the registration numbers will continue to rise.

Statewide, Minnesota was the #1 turnout state as it has been in every presidential election since 1976. The State turnout was a little more than 77%, the County turnout was 72% and the City turnout was 66%. The highest voter turnout was the Highland District and the lowest voter turnout was the North End/Frogstown District, which are adjacent to each other. Some explanations for this difference in voter turnout in adjacent districts are:

1. People with lower incomes vote at lower rates than those with higher incomes.
2. People with higher education levels vote more than those who are lesser educated.
3. Homeowners vote more than renters.
4. 20 to 22-year-olds consistently vote less than those older and younger than them. Voter turnout for 18-year-olds is 60%. Voter turnout for 20-year-olds is 29%.

Based on the 2000 census, Minnesota's average age was 34. The average age of a St. Paul resident was 31, younger because St. Paul is a college town, and an immigrant community with generally larger families (more children),

From our last presidential election in 2000, county voter turnout was up by 11%; city voter turnout was up by 13%.

In the Highland District, the increase was 12% over the year 2002. In the North End/Frogtown District, however, the increase was 44% over 2002. A number of community groups were actively door knocking and registering voters in the North End/Frogtown District.

The primary was September 15 and it was a record low turnout. However, the next day registration was opened up for five weeks and 27,000 registrations were processed. On Election Day, 57,000 registrations were processed.

Ramsey County is exempted from the motor vehicle law and does not have a legal mandate to take affirmative steps to register voters. In Minnesota, the entire state is exempt from the National Board of Registration Act, which Congress enacted in 1993.

In order to help voters whose native language is not English, Ramsey County will be acquiring some assisted voter technology. It is a voting device that is used with headphones that explains the voting process in a native language and guides the voter through the ballot. Ramsey County will use some of the devices this year and the following year, the law requires that every polling place has one. It can also assist visually impaired voters.

Our main immigrant groups in St. Paul and Ramsey County are the Hmong from Southeast Asia, Somalis, Russians and those emanating from Mexico.

Because the immigrant population is high, there is a great need for bilingual election judges. In St. Paul this year, there were 50 bilingual judges who spoke Hmong, 40 who spoke Spanish, two who spoke Russian and one that spoke Somali.

St. Paul has a high immigrant population in part because the economy is strong and jobs are available. Immigrants who come to the U.S. tend to have higher incomes and higher education.

Some of the means of voter outreach are adding election information to the County newsletter than is mailed out two to four times per year. For \$80,000 a postcard can be sent to every registered voter in Ramsey County. In addition, the community groups can canvass door-to-door, perhaps with the County's monetary assistance.

The law requires Ramsey County to send election judges to every hospital and nursing home in the county. Ramsey County also has direct responsibility for St. Paul where there are 26 nursing homes and four hospitals.

A question was raised as to the budget of the Elections Division. Joe Mansky stated that the budget varies from year to year. Even years are relatively high years because the activity level is higher in those years. The bulk of the budget comes from the City of St. Paul and the School District. Approximately 35% of the budget is from the County levy.

Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Commissioner Wiessner's comments are summarized as follows:

Since last meeting, three county commissioners were up for re-election and all were re-elected: Tony Bennett, Victoria Reinhardt and Jan Wiessner.

- Commissioner Haigh resigned to take a position with Habitat for Humanity. There will be a special election in March to fill this spot.
- Ramsey County moved into the new Public Works Facility/Sheriff Patrol Station.
- Ramsey County is working on an 800 MHz radio system that may include all four current dispatch centers.
- The Commissioners have been actively involved with the State legislature regarding funding and mandates. Ramsey County's work is heavily interconnected with the work of the State legislature.
- With regard to local government aid, there is a proposal to raise fees at the Ramsey Nursing Home. In the past, Ramsey County has subsidized the nursing home with property taxes. However, the nursing home is a union home (higher salaries) and rates have not increased in ten years. The County was subsidizing the nursing home at the rate of approximately \$150,000 per year. That amount is expected to rise to \$500,000 and a few years after that, to \$1 million per year.
- The light rail corridor along University Avenue is moving forward. At this time, it has been added into the Senate bonding bill but not yet into the House bonding bill. The next step would be a feasibility study, which would determine what mode of transit should be used on that corridor. The corridor is defined as going along University Avenue from downtown Minneapolis to downtown St. Paul, through the University of Minnesota and by the State Capitol. The proposal is the rail lines would be placed down the middle of University Avenue.

SET NEXT MEETING DATE:

The next meeting will be Monday, May 2, 2005 at 7:00 P.M. at the St. Anthony Park Library, 2245 Como Avenue, St. Paul, MN.

ADJOURNMENT:

A MOTION was made, SECONDED and CARRIED to adjourn the meeting. There being no further business to come before the Charter Commission, the meeting was adjourned.