

MINUTES  
RAMSEY COUNTY CHARTER COMMISSION  
August 4, 2008  
7:00 p.m.

The Ramsey County Charter Commission met on Monday, August 4, 2008 at 7:00 p.m., at the Association of Minnesota Counties Building, 125 Charles Avenue, St. Paul.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

District 1: Ben Stephens  
District 2: Elwyn Sands  
District 3: Frank Gurney  
District 4: Peter Hendricks  
District 5: Lyle Nelson  
Rod Halvorson  
District 6: Russ Miller  
District 7: Bud Berry  
At Large: Mike Fratto, Chair  
Minoka Kitto

**MEMBERS ABSENT:**

District 1: Sharon Klumpp  
District 2: Robert Bell  
District 3: James Kilbride  
District 4: Chris Leifeld  
District 6: A.L. Brown  
District 7: Marvin Koppen  
At Large: Beth Miller

**OTHERS PRESENT:** Commissioner Janice Rettman; Darwin Lookingbill, County Attorney's Office; Bonnie Jackelen, County Manager's Office.

**CALL TO ORDER:**

Chair Mike Fratto called the meeting to order.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES:**

Frank Gurney moved, seconded by Minoka Kitto, to approve the minutes of the May 5, 2008 Charter Commission meeting. MOTION CARRIED.

**COUNTY BOARD UPDATE:**

Commissioner Janice Rettman distributed copies of the 2008-2009 "mini budget books". With the two-year budget, the budget figures are enumerated in the budget books for both years. The critical success indicators would be reviewed for 2009. The budget would be reviewed for any changes on August 19. Levy limits are going into effect for 2009, 2010 and 2011. The County Manager's recommendations to the County Board, as presented in the mini budget books, are that the budget for 2009 is in compliance with the levy limits.

The State increased the county program aid money, but the loss from federal and state money was slightly greater than the increase. The State made cuts to counties to pay for the Public Defender's Office, along with other cuts such as early release of prisoners and child support enforcement. Discussion is needed because if cuts continue, how much can the levy take? Implementation of the ¼% sales tax in Ramsey County took the cost of the light rail off the levy, which is a good thing, but it still comes down to the increase in the 2009 budget of about a 3% increase in spending with about a 5% levy increase. The County Board will make a decision in September on the maximum levy, and in December, adopt the budget.

The City of St. Paul had requested a 15-year extension of the Downtown/Riverfront Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district. The TIF would have defeased this year, and the County would have picked up \$1.5-\$1.8 million, which could be levied for, or not increase taxes by that amount. The County would get about double that amount for the next 15 years, which is good. However, the forecast from the State would not cover that. About 75% of properties in downtown St. Paul pay into the TIF.

Human services, social services and mental health programs will be hit extremely hard in 2010 and 2011. Most county services are mandated. It is important that when making systems changes, if one program isn't performing as well as it should be in critical success indicators, to modify or end the program and go on to another program.

Commissioner Rettman said the County does not collect taxes on utility bills. Franchise fees are handled by the City of St. Paul. The environmental charge, which goes to the County, was moved from the County's tax bill to the trash bills, because it was a better return to the taxpayer.

Russ Miller, citing page 7 of the budget booklet, asked about the 12.8% increase in market values in the City of St. Paul.

Commissioner Rettman said that was a tax comparison for 2007-2008. In the 2008-2009 budget, it went down 5%. This is just a comparison of a 12% market value in St. Paul and 1.5% in the suburban area.

Commissioner Rettman said that at one point in time the Property Records and Revenue Department lagged behind in registration of properties – they are now not only meeting the State's expectations, but we are exceeding them.

Commissioner Rettman said a decline in property values is being seen. Taxes on foreclosed properties are still being paid by the lending organizations.

Rod Halvorson suggested adding the words "as of \_\_\_ date" to the notices that are mailed out, that says: "if you believe the value of your home has less assessed value, look at this line, and you can challenge it".

Darwin said the date would be January 2 of each year. He added that taxes paid in 2008 are based upon the value as of January 2, 2007.

Rod Halvorson said putting in the date would save a lot of time for people who have applied for a reduction.

Bud Berry brought up Beam Avenue, which is currently being re-done, which is taking a long time to complete. Mike Fratto brought up Ivy Avenue west of White Bear Avenue, which is also taking a long time to complete. Comparisons were made to the I-35W Bridge.

Commissioner Rettman said she feels that if every project included project labor agreements to be on-time and on-budget, it would help tremendously. The County has a limited amount of money available for roads and bridges, and there has been a great deal of competition for that money. That should change with money coming in beginning 2008, for use in 2009, from MVET dollars.

Mike Fratto said North St. Paul Road, west of Van Dyke, has been narrowed to one lane for more than a couple years, with barricades up for seemingly no reason at all.

Commissioner Rettman said she would ask the questions from County Departments and report back to Commission members on their concerns.

Mike Fratto raised the question about the Sheriff's ability to take back the Emergency Communications Center (ECC), and whether issues have been resolved.

Darwin Lookingbill said having worked on the Board documentation that put the ECC under the County Manager, it is his opinion that it was the appropriate place. The authority is with the County. One statute addresses the Sheriff having the ability to run his own dispatching for his

own people. He has no authority to take over the 911 part of it. He couldn't take over the whole Emergency Communications Center.

Commissioner Rettman said the County was able to get federal money for a new system, so we could be connected with the entire metropolitan area and therefore the entire state. We were the missing link in the metro area; we were not interoperable.

Commissioner Rettman said the ECC allows all the systems, except for White Bear Lake, which has its own system, to communicate with each other, meeting every standard; no one was laid off, additional staff were added. There is a 60 (county)/40 (municipalities) cost share split, which saved the City of St. Paul \$6 million immediately. There has been cost savings for all of the municipalities in addition to the receipt of new equipment. Every call is meeting every standard. There have been some problems, which are being addressed. Scott Williams is the Director of the Emergency Communications Center, which is located near the Law Enforcement Center. There is a new complaint number available.

Commissioner Rettman provided materials regarding emergency preparedness and talked about a 'grab and go' kit. The Public Health Department has also put together brochures. Medicines and shoes were discussed as part of an emergency list.

Rod Halvorson asked Commissioner Rettman if the County Board has identified anything it would like the Charter Commission to consider changing in the Charter.

Commissioner Rettman said that is a good question and she would think about it.

Peter Hendricks cited the 2007 salary increase adopted by the County Board. He asked Commissioner Rettman if she felt that would happen again, and whether the Charter should be amended regarding pay increases for Commissioners.

Commissioner Rettman said she voted against the salary increase. As background, it was a political season when the City Council adopted a freeze in salary at \$30,000. It went on the ballot and passed. She felt it didn't belong on the ballot at \$30,000 because it should be a fair wage but not an extreme wage. She felt the recent County Board salary increase was extreme -- that 25% was a huge jump -- who else gets that kind of raise. She loves her job; it is not about worth as much as being a public servant. She has no other income and still has a mortgage. She has continued to vote against pay increases. She said she would never ask the Charter Commission to study this, but if coming up with a logical reason on how to make those adjustments, she would not argue against it. If the Charter Commission were to look at the salary issue, it should be looked at in the spirit of what it would be based upon and that it would not rule out anybody being an elected public servant.

Mike Fratto said the City Council set their rate at \$30,000 because it was a part time Council and one of the reasons for passing an increase was they still spend 40-60 hours a week doing the job.

Russ Miller added that in order to get that they went from two years to four years -- when they changed the one, they didn't change the other or even address it.

Mike Fratto said the situation changed relative to the amount of time they were working and why they didn't think it was similar.

Bud Berry said he has had an interest in emergency management for many years, and worries about Judd Freed, Director, Emergency Management. He asked if the County Manager is getting enough money to do what he needs to do. He has a tough job; he put together a system where for many years Emergency Management had difficulty.

Commissioner Rettman said he is “building up” with the municipalities. She believes Judd is getting enough resources, meeting almost all his critical success indicators. The County Board is trying to make sure we are prepared and have back-up for him. She is a certified emergency responder.

Commissioner Rettman said the County Board has stated that Ramsey County taxpayers would pay nothing for the upcoming Republican National Convention (RNC). Ramsey County wants a safe convention and to make certain that taxpayers don't front any costs, and to get our share of the \$50 million for providing services.

#### NEW BUSINESS:

Elwyn Sands distributed copies of a tax assessment issue with Advent Lutheran Church in Roseville, located at Hamline and Josephine Road, involving a pastor's pension issue. Ramsey County has assessed a tax on the basis of supposedly dormant acreage on the church's property. Why is Ramsey County involving itself in such a controversial issue, and who is making the decision? He asked if Darwin could see what is going on, why it is going on, and what if anything should be done about it. He wanted to know how the Charter Commission feels about Ramsey County picking on churches. He doesn't feel they should be; there isn't enough money in it. A letter was sent out to 700+ churches. How many got 'hit'; how much did they get? He would leave it up to Darwin to figure out what the Commission's abilities are regarding taxes.

Darwin said he would report back to the Commission. There is a difference between the 501(c)(3) status and exemption for property tax purposes. In Minnesota law, churches are exempt from property tax purposes – is that totally separate from their federal income tax obligations, if any. Ramsey County is required every 4-5 years to periodically review all properties in the County for exempt status to determine if they are tax exempt. That may have happened here as part of that process.

Elwyn Sands said he is unhappy with the way the Ramsey County Commissioners determine their own salary, and read from the compensation section of the Charter about the process. He asked Darwin why the Charter is set up so that the Board can raise its own salary. Why not have it set up so that somebody outside the County can make that determination – perhaps the Charter Commission.

Darwin Lookingbill said if the Board wanted to look into that as an issue that would be a topic the Charter Commission would have authority to access. The original Charter Commission wrote the Charter to include the language as it currently reads.

There was consensus from the other Commission members that they would not like to have authority for setting Commissioner's salaries.

Mike Fratto said the Charter would set the rules. It might be that a Charter amendment could be put to the voters that would change how the increases would be determined, possibly based on some relationship to cost-of-living. The Charter Commission would need to come up with amended language.

Someone said that a starting point could be to look at how other counties set their salaries – by ordinance or resolution.

Darwin said the standard is by board resolution. The difference with the Ramsey County Charter is that the original Charter Commission thought it was making it tougher on Ramsey County with more accountability by requiring an ordinance process. In point of fact, it doesn't make that much difference other than having to publish notices, and follow other procedures,

and the Commissioners are still voting on their own salary. It is nearly impossible to get enough votes to bring forth a referendum to override it. Ramsey County's process does bring out more visibility than other county boards.

Mike Fratto said he would like the Commission to think about this issue, how this could be framed in such a way to protect the public from overly zealous Commissioners raising their own salaries. Any ideas should be sent to Bonnie Jackelen before the next meeting.

Another suggested amendment pertained to whether or not the Charter Commission has authority on the issue of campaign financing. He would like to see an individual donation limited to \$300 to a PAC.

Darwin said he would look into the issue of campaign financing.

Bonnie Jackelen said that for those Commission members with terms to expire, and if eligible for reappointment, they would hear from District Court.

Mike Fratto asked Russ Miller and Peter Hendrix to work on the nominating committee.

#### **SET NEXT MEETING DATE**

The next meeting was set for Monday, October 27, 2008.

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was declared adjourned.