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SAINT PAUL

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## EDITORIALS

### CHARTER AMENDMENTS

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## Here are suggestions on county questions

Voters in Ramsey County will get to experience something unique Nov. 8. They will cast their ballots on two questions pertaining to how the county is operated. Nowhere in Minnesota has this ever occurred before.

Why Ramsey? Because in 1990, Ramsey became the first Minnesota county to receive approval from voters to operate under a charter. Others operate mostly or exclusively under state law. The charter gives Ramsey more flexibility in the management of its affairs. It became effective in November 1992.

Now, the Ramsey County Charter Commission has come forward with two proposed amendments. One deals with preserving parks and open space; the other with how long those appointed to vacancies in the posts of sheriff and county attorney can serve before standing for election. Here is our analysis of each:

#### No Net Loss

The amendment, if approved, would restrict the county board from selling or leasing park, recreational or open space land and facilities, or converting them to another use. Before the board could do that, it would first have to replace the land and facilities with something equivalent in amount and similar in quality.

The amendment grows out of a proposal in 1993 that Ramsey County sell the 18-hole Goodrich Golf Course in Maplewood to the North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale School District as the site for a new high school. Ultimately, Ramsey County refused to sell the property. County board members then also approved a resolution providing a "no net loss" policy for park land.

That policy could be changed at any time by a majority vote of the seven-member board of commissioners. By putting the policy into the charter, there would be a greater level of protection for the principle. No deviation would be possible unless voters first approved.

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Ramsey County now has 5,780 acres of county parks, open space and recreation areas. Is that enough, too little, too much? The National Recreation and Parks Association recommends a minimum of 17 acres of total parkland per 1,000 people. The Metropolitan Council recommends at least 25 acres per 1,000 people. By itself, Ramsey County provides 12 acres per thousand. Throw in parks and open space maintained by St. Paul, all the suburbs and school districts in the county and the number jumps to 27 acres per 1,000 people.

The key supporter of the amendment is the Friends of the Parks and Trails of St. Paul and Ramsey County. It is their intention that the "no net loss" policy apply not simply to the current acreage of park land, but that the base minimum increase with any gifts or acquisitions.

Further, they argue that if significant new additions to parks at any level of government occur in Ramsey County, that should not provide a license for the county to dispose of less desirable park property for housing, jobs, government buildings or other uses.

This is not a totally hypothetical situation. A movement is under way to have part of the 2,500-acre Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant in Arden Hills declared surplus and preserved as a park or wetlands.

The amendment has no organized opposition. Those that conceivably might raise questions about it include housing, industrial and commercial developers. Not only is Ramsey, the smallest county in the state, short on park land, but also on available space for new employers and new housing.

But no one we contacted advocated a no vote. For example, Ken Johnson, head of the St. Paul Port Authority, said his organization is "not lusting after park land for development."

While we believe the amendment is not without problems, on balance it deserves a Yes from voters.

#### Vacancies in office

Approval of this amendment would prevent a person appointed to fill a vacancy in the office of county sheriff or county attorney from serving more than two years without first standing for election. Currently an appointee in either of those posts could serve until the four-year term of office for each expires. In theory, that could be nearly four years.

As long as voters want to continue electing those who hold these positions, the amendment makes eminently good sense and merits a Yes vote.