



## **Election Task Force Recommendations Report**

### **Purpose of Elections Task Force**

The City Council formed the Election Task Force in March 2006 to study City election processes. Task Force members further defined their mission to consider various facets of the election process in terms of how those processes encourage participation and involvement in civic affairs and voting in Golden Valley. The recommendations contained in this report are inclusive versus exclusive and seek to foster citizen participation in the electoral process.

The Task Force considered even versus odd year elections, two-year versus four-year mayoral terms, Council salaries, a possible City primary election, the process for filling vacancies on the Council, a code of ethics for candidates, and other topics. Some topics originally scheduled for discussion, such as election by a ward system and instant runoff voting (IRV), were deemed to be outside City control due to statutory limitations. This does not mean there may not be continued interest in these topics by the Council or residents of the City.

The Task Force was made up of the following members:

Gary Cohen, Chair  
Anne Borgen, League of Women Voters representative  
Jackie Dietz  
Lynn Gitelis  
Cindy Reichert  
Jorge Saavedra  
Khamben Sanavongsay  
Marshall Tanick  
Jeff Cater (Former Chair, resigned 5/06)  
Staff Liaison Sue Virnig, Finance Director  
Staff Liaison Edie Ernst, Accounts Receivable/Elections Assistant.

The Task Force held its organizational meeting in March where it was determined that the most effective study of the issues would include information gathered from Minnesota Statutes and ordinances and policies of the City of Golden Valley, as well as policies and practices of other comparable cities. It was agreed at the onset that the opinions of Golden Valley citizens should be an important part of the study. A "Voter Fair" open house was held on September 27 to share information with and receive input from our residents. In addition, regular communication about Task Force activities was provided through the City's web site and newsletters.

The Task Force met monthly for approximately two hours each meeting. The information that follows is the culmination of several months of study on the issues.

The Task Force wishes to thank the City of Shoreview for their 1992 Election Task Force Report. This report provided us with a wealth of information for the topics we discussed. Golden Valley now joins Shoreview as one of the few cities in the state of Minnesota to create an Election Task Force.

## **Even/Odd Year Elections**

**Issue:** *Should the City maintain its current schedule of odd year elections or move to elections held in conjunction with State and Federal elections in even years?*

As a Statutory Plan B City, Golden Valley may choose whether to hold municipal elections in an odd or even year cycle. Golden Valley currently holds elections in conjunction with the Hopkins and Robbinsdale School Board elections in odd years. Discussion centered on voter turnout, the cost of running an independent municipal election and practices of other comparable cities. A survey of other cities was conducted.

The Task Force considered the pros and cons of each election cycle. Research indicated that even year elections are less costly and voter turnout is much higher. Because even year elections attract a higher turnout, its likely more citizens would participate in the election of local officials.

Odd year elections help to maintain local identity and provide more media coverage for local candidates and issues. The cost of campaigning may be less for candidates that do not need to compete with state and federal candidates for resident interest. Odd year elections are also historically less partisan. An annual November election creates a mindset of civic responsibility and keeps election laws and rules fresh in the minds of election judges. Moving to an even year cycle would also force the two school districts to hold elections independently of the City, or to change their own election cycle.

Discussion on voter turnout concluded that even though voter turnout may be higher in an even year election, voters may not be educated on local issues. Even in even year elections, there is drop-off from votes for national/state issues to local issues. Task Force members were unanimous in their belief that a greater effort on increasing voter turnout and awareness of local issues should be made, regardless of which election cycle was recommended. This election process may best be undertaken as a partnership with community groups or in cooperation with other government partners.

Citizen input received at the Voter Fair showed that seven persons favored even year elections and ten persons favored odd year elections. Task Force discussions also reflected a discrepancy of views by its members on this subject during lively discussion.

**Recommendation:** *Golden Valley's municipal elections should remain on an odd year cycle. The Task Force further recommended that greater efforts should be made to increase voter awareness and turnout in local elections. Those efforts could include greater coverage via the New Hope/Golden Valley Sun Post, Northwest Community Television (Cable 12), Golden Valley's newsletter and web site, as well as other media. Additionally, Golden Valley staff should also explore the use of non-traditional sources for municipal election publicity.*

## **Mayoral Term**

**Issue:** *Should the term of the Mayor remain a two year term, or should the term be a four year term?*

The Mayoral term in Golden Valley is currently a two year term while all City Council Member terms are four years. Commission members contacted other Plan B cities to ask the following questions:

- What is the current Mayoral term length in your city?
- Do you have a preference for term length?
- If so, what is the reason for your preference?

Responses indicated that eight of the twelve cities surveyed preferred a four year term length. Reasons stated were that the four year term allowed more time to establish relationships and trust within the constituent base. Four years also allowed more time to learn the job and take on large-scale issues. Some responders believed the longer term provided more continuity and stability for the City. Some cities stated that with a two year term, campaigning becomes burdensome and can distract the Mayor from other issues.

Fourteen citizens surveyed at the Voter Fair preferred a four year term and three persons thought the term should be just two years.

**Recommendation:** *The Task Force strongly supports a move to a four year Mayoral term. Establishing the longer term length will require adjustments in election cycles. The process used to accomplish that change will require further consideration.*

## **Council Salaries**

**Issue:** *Is the current level of compensation for Mayor and Council Members appropriate?*

The Task Force reviewed Council and Mayor salary comparisons. In addition to the salary amount, the Task Force considered how the City could attract a more diverse group of candidates for Council and Mayoral seats. Ideas brought forth included: increased monetary compensation, tuition reimbursement and other education benefits, the opportunity to participate in City insurance plans, and reimbursement for meeting and travel expenses related to the work of the Council Members. The Task Force questioned how an ordinance providing additional benefits for Council Members would be enacted, and what authority the city has to provide non-traditional forms of compensation.

The group considered the premise that Council salaries may be considered to be symbolic. They discussed the purpose of Council compensation and the effect compensation and benefit levels may have on potential candidates and their decision to run.

Responses from the Voter Fair indicated that seven persons believed the Council salary should be increased, and eight believed the salaries should not be increased or should stay the same.

**Recommendation:** *The Task Force recommends further deliberation by the City Council in setting compensation limits and offers the following considerations to guide that Council discussion:*

- 1. Consider role of salaries in decision to run; encourage access of under-represented communities in seeking and holding office; define what the symbolic role of compensation means to members of Council.*
- 2. Council “across the board increase” in salaries; stipend to be at or near the top of salary scale for like communities.*
- 3. Enact ordinance that will provide for cost of living increase, Council stipend or some other “objective measurement”.*
- 4. Should include enhanced benefits, such as tuition reimbursement, as a means of encouraging Council participation; classes taken should be relevant to City business and there should be “some” maximum on reimbursement amount.*

### **Process for filling vacancy on Council**

**Issue:** *Is the process currently in place for filling vacancies on the council adequate?*

Task Force members invited City Attorney Barnard to join in the discussion on this topic. State law requires the City Council to appoint a replacement to serve out the balance of the term in the case of a vacancy. Council has the authority to adopt an ordinance calling for a special election to fill a vacancy, or to determine the process it will use to make a Council appointment. Given the cost of a special election and the rarity of vacancies, the Task Force agreed that the laws currently in place provide adequate guidance. Also given the fact that vacancies may occur for differing reasons and at different times, the option for flexibility in determining an appropriate process for filling a vacancy is important to maintain.

The Task Force also reviewed statute sections regarding removal of a Council Member and determined that no additional options exist for the City on this topic beyond current statutes.

**Recommendation:** *We recommend no changes to the current process for filling Council vacancies.*

## **Code of Ethics**

**Issue:** *Should Council adopt a local Code of Ethics beyond that which is called for in statute?*

As part of this study, Task Force members reviewed a document analyzing the City's resolution and applicable state laws submitted by City Attorney Barnard.

City ordinances that have been studied appear by their language and previous interpretations to prohibit board and commission members from providing monetary support or personal support to candidates for elective City positions. Current ordinances and statutes prohibit quid pro quo and similar wrongful behavior. In light of recent Supreme Court decisions, including *White versus Republican Party of Minnesota*, it is clear that the court supports the broadest interpretation of freedom of speech and financial involvement in elections. Board and commission members are among the most active Golden Valley citizens and there should be no prohibition on this type of involvement that is allowed by other Golden Valley residents.

Additionally, the Task Force encourages the City Council to study whether a voluntary campaign code of ethics should be adopted for Golden Valley municipal elections. The League of Women Voters "Minnesota Compact on Campaign Standards" could be reviewed as a model for such a voluntary code.

**Recommendation:** *City Council should review relevant City ordinances and remove restrictive language regarding board and commission member involvement in City elections in concert with recent court rulings and prevailing law.*

*The Task Force encourages the City Council to study whether a voluntary campaign code of ethics should be adopted for Golden Valley municipal elections.*

## **Municipal Primaries**

**Issue:** *Should the City have a municipal primary?*

The Task Force studied recent municipal elections in Golden Valley and noted that large numbers of persons have not filed for municipal offices. Should a trend of larger numbers of individuals filing for municipal office be seen in the future (for example, more than double the number of people filing as to be elected), the topic of the advisability for a primary should be revisited. Recent legislative changes to require school boards to hold primaries have been met with resistance.

**Recommendation:** *A municipal primary is not appropriate or needed at this time in Golden Valley.*

## **Conclusion**

The Golden Valley Elections Task Force hereby submits this report to the City Council with the recommendations outlined above. Members found the assignment interesting and rewarding.

During our discussions, we learned that there is an orientation package for Council candidates. Based on what we learned as a group during our meetings, the Elections Task Force would be willing to help review and revise this package to provide for more informed candidates for municipal office in Golden Valley.

Should Council wish to assign the Task Force to further study of these or any other related issues, please do not hesitate to reconvene its members.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Chair Gary Cohen