

LOCAL

Help wanted at City Hall: Hundreds of local offices have nobody running for them

Local candidate shortage has some worried about future of civic leadership in Minnesota.

By John Reinan (<http://www.startribune.com/john-reinan/273043871/>) and MaryJo Webster (<http://www.startribune.com/maryjo-webster/303594441/>) Star Tribune

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City halls across Minnesota are hanging up “Help wanted” signs.

Hundreds of local offices — mayor, council member, clerk — have no candidates running for them.

In Minnetonka Beach, an upscale Twin Cities suburb, officials worry that the city’s business will grind to a halt because nobody is running for city treasurer. In Elmore, boyhood home of former Vice President Walter Mondale, they’re hoping somebody — anybody — will raise their hand to fill a vacant City Council seat.

Along with the vacant ballot slots, 60 percent of all local offices in Minnesota have only a single candidate running unopposed. In all, two-thirds of local offices statewide have either no candidate running or just one.

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Adrian Township	Town Supervisor	1	0
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The dearth of candidates interested in political life has local officials struggling with where Minnesota will find its next generation of leaders.

“You start looking ahead and wonder, who will the future small-town leaders be?” said Connie Holmes, mayor of Waverly, population 1,357, which has no candidates running for a vacant City Council seat. “I don’t know who those leaders will be.”



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_147656183093815.j)
JOHN REINAN

Connie Holmes, mayor of Waverly, inside the historic village hall. Holmes said city officials are “very disappointed” that a vacant City...

Jim Weikum, mayor of Biwabik, isn't sure why nobody has filed for either of the two City Council seats open in the Iron Range community of 998 residents.

"I wish I had a really good take on why people aren't stepping up," he said. "It's one of those delicate things where you wonder if you should be more active in going out and encouraging people. But sometimes that's perceived as trying to stack the council.

"I've had conversations when an issue comes up and people are unhappy," Weikum said. "I'll say, 'Maybe you should consider filing.' But apparently being unhappy isn't enough of an incentive to actually get involved."

'Something's got to happen'

Local officials and academic political experts offer a number of reasons for the lack of interest in running for office. Many cite the demands of modern life.

"We're full of CEOs, doctors, lawyers — very accomplished professionals," said Jaci Lindstrom, a City Council member in Minnetonka Beach, population 540. "But because we have so much talent, they're busy. They're busy, and they're raising families."

As a charter city, Lindstrom said, Minnetonka Beach can't operate without a treasurer, and no one has filed for the office. Now the city is getting a legal opinion on whether it can move forward on a proposed bond issue without an elected treasurer.

In Waverly, about 35 miles west of Minneapolis, many residents have long work commutes, Holmes said.

"When they get home they want to be with their family, and they want to go to their children's activities. And it's extremely difficult to balance the time it takes to be on the council along with your work, your commute and those family demands," she said.

The mayor of Grand Marais, Jay Arrowsmith-DeCoux, is looking at two vacant seats on his five-member council, with no candidate for either of them.

"The dynamic I've noticed is, something's got to happen to motivate people to run," he said, "and in small towns, not a lot happens." In fact, the mayor isn't on the ballot, either, and no one else is running for the job. Arrowsmith-DeCoux said he was on a Boundary Waters trip and missed the filing deadline, but he wants another term and is encouraging people to write him in.

Candidates aren't drawn by the thought of running a small town.

"It's such a thankless job," said Joan Pomp, owner of a wood preserving plant in Tenstrike, a town of 201 in Beltrami County. "It's basically, keep gravel on the roads and make sure it's plowed. It's all about the roads."

No one has filed to run for mayor of Tenstrike, nor for either of its two vacant City Council seats. Pomp said the residents have their own ways of deciding elections.

"They just don't bother to go down to register, and we just write them in," she said. "It's like for the council: 'Which one is up this time?' And we just write them in."

Democracy overdose?

It may be that Minnesotans have simply overdosed on democracy, said Larry Jacobs, a University of Minnesota political science professor and faculty member at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

"I think there is what you might describe as democratic fatigue," Jacobs said. "The number of offices and the number of elections we have in Minnesota is outstripping the capacity and interest of our earnest, well-regarded citizens."

It's important to remember that government service isn't the only way to make an impact on a community, said Dennis Donovan, a national organizer at Augsburg College's Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship.

"You have to work with government, but it shouldn't be the be-all, end-all," Donovan said. "Politics is not just something politicians do." When people learn to work together on community goals outside of government, they can enter the elected sphere and be much more effective.

As executive director of the Minnesota League of Cities, Dave Unmacht works on issues affecting more than 800 member cities.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1476561)

JOHN REINAN

Connie Holmes, mayor of Waverly, at the historic village hall. Holmes said city officials are "very disappointed" that a vacant City Council seat...

“I’m not alarmed by these numbers. I don’t lose any sleep over them,” he said. “But what they should drive is a conversation about, how do we build grass-roots support for people in public office at the earliest level? I’m talking about grade school, middle school.

“We need to have a conversation about building leadership capacity,” Unmacht said. “Who are our future mayors and council members? And I’m not talking about 2018 — I’m talking about 2030, 2040.”

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