

DFL seeks fresh start for schools

Steve Brandt, Star Tribune, May 13, 2006

Minneapolis DFLers once again snubbed incumbency in picking a field of four school board candidates on Saturday to back in this fall's elections.

More than 700 delegates meeting in north Minneapolis endorsed Pam Costain, Chris Stewart, Theatrice (T) Williams and Tom Madden.

They dropped their support of board chairman Joseph Erickson, their endorsee four years ago, after continued tough sledding for the school district. In 2004, the convention bypassed delegates of two incumbents in favor of two newcomers.

"There was a very strong and unstoppable feeling toward the board," said Erickson, who won support from barely one-quarter of delegates.

The endorsement decision means that six of seven board seats next January will be held by first-termers. Erickson was the only one of four members with terms expiring to seek to serve again.

The party gave first-ballot endorsement to Costain, a veteran organizer, and political newcomer Stewart. Williams and Madden were just below the 60 percent of delegates needed after the first ballot.

Costain and Stewart appealed to the convention to endorse a full slate before adjourning; delegates added Williams on the second ballot. When remaining candidates Jill Davis, Polly Harrison-Townsend and Erickson dropped out, Madden was endorsed by acclamation.

Most endorsees combined backing from labor and from the progressive Take Action Minnesota, the same combination that sent political rookies Peggy Flanagan and Lydia Lee to the board in 2004. Erickson said his bid was affected by factors that have beset the district, including five years of budget cuts caused by falling enrollment that also prompted school closings, and the hiring and ouster of former Superintendent Thandiwe Peebles with a cost of \$250,000.

He disagreed with the complaints of some parents that he was arrogant. He said that as an Augsburg College professor his inclination is to teach. That means sharing some of the knowledge he's learned as a board member when contacted by parents on issues, rather than simply nodding and agreeing.

He said that was probably politically naive but "you can only be who you are."

As chairman he played the key role in arranging a buyout of Peebles' contract. He worked weekly with her on improving her leadership style, but ultimately concluded she had to go. He steered a course that kept the reasons for the board's dissatisfaction mostly private, and cut a deal that bought her departure for a known price. He said the alternative was extended public wrangling for an uncertain outcome and an undetermined price.

The endorsements left delegates from northeast Minneapolis, where three candidates were running, frustrated after nine years without an area resident on the board.

All but Costain among the endorsees favor a pending legislative proposal that calls for expanding the board to nine members and electing six by geographic districts, as for the Park Board. If passed by lawmakers, the proposal would require majority support by board members or a favorable referendum vote to take effect.

The election of Williams, who drew respect from delegates for his decades of public policy experience, would double North Side representation. Stewart, at 38 the youngest candidate, impressed delegates with his energy and passion for preparing students for careers and jobs.

Madden emphasized his business background. Costain visited more than 40 schools during her campaign.

Costain said she's hopeful about the district's future. "I think we've seen some of the toughest days, and we're going to rebuild from the bottom up," she said.

No Republican candidates have emerged; candidate Doug Mann failed to win Green Party endorsement on Saturday.

DFLers also endorsed a new system of voting in municipal elections. Instant runoff voting allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority of first choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and second-choice votes cast by supporters of that candidate are distributed among the survivors. That process is repeated until there is a majority winner.

Backers hope the City Council will schedule a charter change vote on instant runoff voting in November's election, but also are gathering petition signatures for such a vote.

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