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Briefs

St. Paul hires new firm to search for superintendent

Dissatisfied with the results of the last superintendent search, the St. Paul school board voted Tuesday to hire a new firm to handle the project.

Ira Krinsky, a San Francisco-based consultant who helped the district hire Carmun Gaines as schools chief seven years ago, will meet with the board at 5:30 p.m. today to discuss the search. He represents Korn/Ferry International, which has an office in Minneapolis.

He was selected for his extensive experience headhunting for school districts and for his familiarity with issues facing communities like St. Paul, said school board member Becky Montgomery, who served on the subcommittee that urged his hiring.

"We felt that Ira best met our needs," she said. So why didn't they hire him when they started the search?

"He was busy," Montgomery said, laughing.

Gaines stepped down in June to take a job in the private sector, and the district worked with the National School Boards Association to find a replacement. In early August, the board rejected the two superintendent finalists and voted to renew the search. They also sought proposals from a handful of others.

Meanwhile, interim superintendent Bill Larson will finish the school year at the helm.

— *Allie Shah*

Billboards prompt suit

Anti-billboard activists have sued the city of St. Paul for allowing two billboards to remain standing after they were damaged in a storm last spring and later repaired.

The suit was filed on behalf of Scenic Minnesota, the Highland Area Community Council and J. Rogers Chambers, a Summit Avenue resident who claims that his view from a back window of his house is blocked by a billboard at Grand and Fairview Avs.

That billboard, and another atop the Highland Shopping Center, are located in areas where placement of new billboards or the replacement of damaged sign structures is prohibited under city ordinance. Panels on each billboard were wrecked in the May 30 storm that uprooted scores of trees in the Highland Park and Macalester-Groveland neighborhoods. The panels were later repaired.

The St. Paul City Council voted last month to allow the billboards to remain because their support structures were not damaged.

The plaintiffs want the court to review the ordinance, said Scenic Minnesota director Brian Bates. "We think the City Council misinterpreted the ordinance when it allowed the billboards to go back up," he said.

Joining the city as defendants are the owners of the property on which the billboards are located, and billboard owners Eller Media Inc.

Eller representatives were unavailable for comment.

— *Kevin Duchschere*

Service center site picked

The decade-long effort to locate a government service center in northern Dakota County ended Tuesday with the selection of an 18-acre site in West St. Paul.

The new Northern Services Center, scheduled to open in 2001, will be near Mendota Road and Hwy. 110 and will consolidate offices from several sites. It will house staff members from the Community Services Administration, Employment and Economic Assistance, Veterans Services, Community Corrections, Public Health and Social Services. The District Court facility now located in the South St. Paul Municipal Building also will move to the new building.

The County Board voted to spend $2.6 million for the site, and will spend another $34 million to prepare the land and construct a 210,000-square-foot building.

The board chose the West St. Paul location over sites in Inver Grove Heights and South St. Paul.

— *Jeffrey W. Peters*

Campus question: Will Ventura add or subtract?

By Mary Jane Smetanka
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Here's a puzzle to challenge the Ph.D.s:

What do you get when you have two giant college systems that want $429 million in new money over the next biennium, a state student-aid system relied on by tens of thousands of college students, and a new governor who says Minnesotans are overtaxed and that students shouldn't need government help to get through school?

Unless you have a crystal ball, you get a big fat question mark and a lot of nervous higher-education officials.

Gov.-elect Jesse Ventura hasn't said much about higher education. Last week he told students at Minneapolis' Roosevelt High School that his priority would be K-12 education.

Nevertheless, higher education makes up a considerable chunk of state spending: $2.45 billion in 1998-99, or 11 percent of the state budget. One of the first things the new governor will do is recommend a 2000-2001 budget to the 1999 Legislature, helping to set two years of operating budgets for the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) systems, which together have 192,000 students this fall.

Both systems have ambitious plans for 2000-2001. Bent on boosting its national profile in both research and teaching, the university's request for $198.8 million in new money focuses on hiring and improving salaries for faculty members and improving undergraduate education. MnSCU's request for $230.6 million in new funding includes a boost in faculty salaries and stresses the impact the system has on Minnesota's economy, training workers and building partnerships with industry.

Rounding out higher-education requests will be a proposal for a $28.5 million jump in funding for state grants, work study and child-care programs that serve college students.

Outgoing Gov. Arne Carlson, who fought for significant capital funding for both systems last session, Tuesday recommended that Ventura and the Legislature support new higher education funding of at least $148.5 million.

Although the coming session is an off year for building projects, Carlson recommended that legislators appropriate $35 million for the second phase of the university's cellular and molecular biology building in Minneapolis and $17.5 million for a new plant genetics center in St. Paul. He did not comment on system requests for operating funds, but he supports $67 million in funding for graduate medical education at the university and the Mayo Clinic, $20 million to boost business partnerships at MnSCU and $5 million to be split between the two systems for student exchange programs abroad.

Higher-ed officials wonder what to expect for funding

Ventura's most-publicized comments about the subject have been on paying for college. During last week's Roosevelt High visit, his comments on tuition aid — "You don't need the government. There are plenty of ways to get through college. You're smart enough." — were greeted with dead silence by students who cheered other comments.

Most students get aid

Minnesota is in the top five or 10 states in granting need-based aid to students, and its system is considered cutting-edge nationally. Most of the state's college students get some kind of aid from either the state or federal government.

At the university's Twin Cities campus, about 56 percent of undergraduates, 22 percent of graduate students and 81 percent of professional students get grants or work-study money, or they have loans through state or federal programs. Two-thirds of MnSCU students receive some sort of aid, and at the 16 colleges of the Minnesota Private College Council, 75 percent of students borrow from state or federal loan programs, and 45 percent of the Minnesotans receive state grants.

"Going to college is not cheap," said Robert Poch, director of the Minnesota Higher Education Services Office, which administers state loans and grants. "If we don't provide some aid . . . I think higher education would be out of reach for a good proportion of the poor population."

While per-capita income in Minnesota increased 11 percent in constant dollars between 1988 and 1997, tuition and fees at the university's College of Liberal Arts increased 58 percent. At state universities it increased 23 percent; at community colleges 35 percent; at technical colleges 25 percent, and at private schools 40 percent.

Minnesota's state grant system, at $109 million the single biggest state aid program, requires shared responsibility by the 60,000 undergraduates who receive such aid. Whether they are rich or poor, they have to come up with at least 47 percent of the price of attending college through working, savings, getting scholarships or borrowing money.

That policy echoes statements on Ventura's campaign Web site, which are far more moderate about paying for college than some of his public statements. The site says students and families "should take the initial responsibility" for college, adding that "grants, loans and part-time jobs should address the next level of responsibility." It also says that if voters are willing to support the cost, the state should pay for the student's last year of college education.

Poch took comfort in the statements about loans and grants. "I didn't see anything there that caused me to despair; I was very heartened by it," he said. "We need to give the governor-elect a chance."

Does Jesse owe his fans?

State higher-education officials are generally cautious but upbeat about Ventura, saying the same thing in a hopeful chorus: He's new, he's smart and while he has a lot to learn about higher-education funding and student aid, he is hiring good people and seems open to discussion.

University President Mark Yudof spoke briefly to Ventura on the phone four days after the election.

"Many young people had voted for him, including students," Yudof said. "He said that made him feel a special responsibility, because young people had trusted him."

Yudof said he hopes to convince Ventura that university funding is part of the state's infrastructure, just as roads and bridges are. MnSCU Chancellor Morrie Anderson echoed that, saying that the system's approach will be "straightforward."

One encouraging sign to higher-education officials is Ventura's hiring of Steve Bosacker, executive director of the university's Board of Regents, as transition chief. Bosacker knows both politics and higher education.

Last week, he said he expected to advise Ventura — "He didn't hire me to stay quiet," Bosacker said — but added that the immediate challenge is to get government structure in place. "It's too soon to really give any meaningful assessment" on where a Ventura administration will stand on higher education, he said last week.

DFL from B1

In wake of election defeats, DFL begins self-examination

The party's executive director, Kathy Czar, who couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday, is "looking at other options," Senese said, and likely will step down, although no formal decision has been made. At an executive committee meeting on Saturday, some committee members complained about Czar's handling of the campaign, although no formal request for her resignation was made.

Senese said he plans to stay on through his term, which ends next spring.

"Some people on the executive committee don't want to look at changes in the party structure," said Scott Cooper, director of the committee. "They prefer to scapegoat some individual. What we need to acknowledge is that the system itself needs to be changed."

Cooper said there is a growing acknowledgment that dwindling attendance at party caucuses and the inability of endorsees to win are signals that change is needed.

Some of it, he said, is as simple as the timing of primaries and caucuses. "We spent six weeks this year talking about why the DFL candidate should win for governor and the rest of the year fighting among ourselves," Cooper said, referring to a mid-September primary election that produced one of the briefest general election races on record.

Outgoing Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman, who won the party's endorsement for governor but lost to Attorney General Hubert Humphrey III in the primary, said an overhaul is in order because in the current system, "the endorsement has no meaning."

Freeman said the state party "was not helpful" during the primary and failed to rally support behind him as the endorsed candidate. "It's clear that the value of the endorsement was minimal," he said. "And if that's the case, why should candidates bother? It's a clear signal that we have to do something if we're going to preserve a grass-roots political system."

"We need to be willing to start with a blank piece of paper and say what kind of party do we want to be, what will make us open, responsive and winning as we move into the next century?"

— **Dick Senese**, DFL Party chairman

Senese said he's serious about initiating change, even though "many people are wedded to the current system and want to view this election as an aberration." That, he said, would be a mistake.

"Clearly, the role of the political party moving into the next century is in flux," he said. "We need to be willing to start with a blank piece of paper and say what kind of party do we want to be, what will make us open, responsive and winning as we move into the next century!"

Despite push, percentage of absentee voters drops

By Robert Whereatt
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Secretary of State Joan Growe said Tuesday that the DFL and Republican parties wasted money when they mass-mailed absentee ballots to eligible voters.

Although more people voted by absentee ballot this year than four years ago, the percentage of absentee voters actually declined, Growe said.

Both parties mailed absentee ballots to potential voters before the election in an effort to increase turnout — in this case, preelection turnout — among their supporters.

The Republican Party mailed about 500,000 at a cost of about $130,000, said Tony Sutton, the party's executive director. The DFL Party mailed about 180,000 at a cost of about $50,000, said Tom Kelly, DFL communications director.

Sutton disagreed that the absentee-ballot effort was a waste of money. Three Republican House candidates won by fewer than 300 votes. The absentee ballot votes may have been pivotal in their victories, he said.

To those guys, the absentee ballot program was probably very valuable," he said.

Kelly said the DFL mailed absentee ballots to DFL "drop-off" voters, those who vote in presidential elections but not in nonpresidential contests. There is no way to tell whether the mass mailings prompted some of them to take part and vote DFL, he said.

Legally, citizens may vote by absentee ballot if they will be out of the precinct on election day; they are ill or disabled; a religious observance prevents them from voting; or they are serving as an election judge in another precinct.

This year 83,348 votes, or 4.43 percent of the total, were cast by absentee ballot. Four years ago 85,710 votes, or 4.78 percent, were cast that way.

Growe's remarks were made at the conclusion of the State Canvassing Board meeting that certified the results of the 1998 general election as correct and official.

Among the results:

➤ 60.45 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, the third-highest total in a nonpresidential election in Minnesota since 1950, when the state began keeping turnout records.

➤ The number of voters — 2,105,377 — was the largest ever in Minnesota to cast ballots for governor.

➤ 15.79 percent of the voters registered on election day.

➤ Supreme Court Associate Justice Alan Page received 1,303,920 votes, the most ever for a statewide candidate in a contested race.

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