

## **St. Louis County: voted 5-2 oppose state legislation that would mandate a photo ID to vote**

St. Louis County commissioners on Tuesday tempered their opposition to state legislation that would require photo identification cards for all Minnesota voters.

The board voted 5-2 in Duluth to oppose state legislation that would mandate a photo ID to vote — if the new state program passes the cost on to the county and county property taxpayers.

It's telling the state that "if you have a better system, then you have to step up to the plate to fund it," said Commissioner Keith Nelson of Eveleth.

A stronger resolution doubting the need and opposing the merits of voter photo ID cards never received a vote when Commissioner Steve Raukar of Hibbing removed his support at the last minute.

The issue attracted the board's largest audience in months, about 50 people, with more than a dozen testifying. It split the County Board, and the public who testified, down ideological lines, with conservatives strongly supporting photo ID and liberals against them.

Some commissioners, including Nelson, said the County Board shouldn't have discussed what is primarily a state issue. But County Auditor Don Dicklich and County Board Chairman Steve O'Neil noted the proposed legislation would require counties to administer the program and issue the cards.

"This directly relates to the business of St. Louis County. We run the elections," O'Neil said, adding that the discussion was "appropriate, responsible and reasonable" for elected officials to have.

Opponents of photo IDs called the legislation a solution in search of a problem, raised by conservatives to stir up animosity against student, urban and poor voters in areas of high Democratic turnout.

Mike Forsman of Ely said anyone who believed there was little or no voter fraud in Minnesota was either "naive, uneducated or had evil intentions" and he accused O'Neil of "political activism" by bringing the resolution to the board. He accused opponents of photo voter IDs of trying to

“perpetuate voter fraud at the individual level.”

“A person gets drug out from under some bridge and someone vouches for him to vote. ... That’s the kind of thing that can be stopped by voter ID,” Forsman said.

Current law allows people to vote if they have a document, such as a utility bill, and someone who lives in the precinct vouches for them. Legislation has advanced in St. Paul this session that would require anyone voting in Minnesota to have a special voter ID card with their current address if they don’t have a valid driver’s license with their current address. County auditors would be required to provide the cards free of charge.

HF89 and SF479, sponsored by Republican lawmakers, have passed government operations committees and await action by additional committees any day. The bill has strong support from the Tea Party and other groups, such as the Minnesota Majority and Minnesota Voters Alliance, which have alleged widespread voter fraud in Minnesota. The legislation would require voters to surrender ID cards upon moving and allows an exception for people to vote without a card by vouching where they were last registered to vote so election officials could check that they didn’t vote twice. Any violation of the new regulations would be a felony.

O’Neil, who sponsored the original resolution, joined Nelson and commissioners Steve Raukar of Hibbing, Peg Sweeney of Proctor and Frank Jewell of Duluth in voting for the resolution. Commissioners Forsman and Chris Dahlberg of Duluth opposed the resolution.

Opponents of the state proposal said many elderly, low-income and student voters might not have the financial or physical ability to keep their driver’s license address current, or even to obtain a photo ID, and that the legislation will discourage people from voting.

Supporters of photo IDs to vote said they are required to show similar identification to cash a check, rent a car and buy a plane ticket. They said the requirement could avoid fraud they say tainted recent close elections in Minnesota. Supporters said all voters should be required to take the personal responsibility to update their address well before elections. And some called for eliminating same-day registration altogether to avoid

fraud.

"If you can go down and sign up for welfare, why can't you get a voter ID card?" said Dan Tankersley of Duluth.

Joyce Benson of the League of Women Voters Duluth, among the groups most in opposition to photo ID rules, said the U.S. has been moving to make it easier, not harder, for people to vote since women, minorities and young adults have been brought into the nation's democracy with the right to vote.

"Every citizen's right to vote is imperative to us," she said. "Requiring a photo ID will deny that right of some elderly, disabled and younger voters."

Dahlberg, a strong supporter of requiring photo ID cards to vote, said advocacy groups, instead of opposing photo IDs, should help their constituencies acquire them. "Let's bring them in, let's get them photo IDs and pull them into the mainstream," Dahlberg said of residents who haven't had proper IDs previously.