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County charter changes eyed

Voters will decide on several modifications, including lifting term limits for supervisors.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published May 23, 2004*)

El Dorado County residents will decide in November whether to eliminate term limits for county supervisors.

The proposal by the county's charter review committee was one of several recommended changes in the county charter that the Board of Supervisors agreed to place on the ballot.

"For a long time, I was in favor of term limits," Supervisor David Solaro said Tuesday in making the motion to let voters decide the issue.

He changed his mind, Solaro said, after seeing the effect term limits have had on the state Legislature. "Everyone is so new that all you're dealing with are lobbyists, and they're calling the shots," he said.

The supervisors currently may serve a maximum of two consecutive four-year terms.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney said he was concerned about the proposal to abandon term limits. "I think people will tell us they want to keep them," he said. "But let them tell us."

Solaro is serving his second term, and Supervisors Helen Baumann and board Chairman Rusty Dupray will begin their second terms in January.

In placing proposed changes on the ballot, the supervisors are not necessarily endorsing them, but rather allowing voters to decide the issues, Dupray said.

Voters, however, will not be asked to weigh in on the charter review committee's recommendation to limit the number of elected department directors to the three required by state law: assessor, district attorney and sheriff.

In El Dorado County, voters also choose the treasurer-tax collector, auditor-controller, recorder-clerk and surveyor.

The board opted not to place the proposal on the ballot, arguing that all seven positions should continue to be elected offices.

"The more people speak about who runs the county, the better the county will be run," Sweeney said.

In discussing rationales for the charter review committee's various recommendations, committee Chairman David Kurtzman told the board in January that the proposal to reduce the number of elected positions was made in light of another proposed charter amendment, which would change the title and duties of the chief administrative officer to a chief executive officer, with department directors reporting to the CEO.

Kurtzman said the committee questioned whether it would make sense to have a number of department

directors who were not accountable to the CEO.

Voters will decide whether to change the title of the county's top administrator and strengthen the powers and duties associated with the position.

The board postponed action on the committee's recommendation to specify in the section of the charter relating to the grand jury that no county officer or employee may decline to produce information on the basis of privilege or confidentiality.

The recommendation responds to a case in 2001 in which the grand jury went to court to require the county to release information sought as part of a grand jury investigation. The county provided the information only after a Superior Court judge ordered it to do so.

Ed Knapp, chief assistant county counsel, argued against the recommended change, describing it as "a set of handcuffs for future boards."

If the supervisors choose to submit the issue to the voters, Knapp said the wording should be revised to specify that certain materials such as personnel documents would not be subject to release.

Richard Nichols, a former grand juror seeking the charter amendment, said he would work with Knapp to reword the recommendation.

A revised proposal will be brought back to the board. The supervisors will decide June 8 whether to refer the proposal to the voters.

The board also agreed to place on the ballot proposed charter amendments that would:

- * Provide that the terms of supervisors begin on the first Monday after the Jan. 1 succeeding their election.
- * Resolve the ambiguity concerning the dates within which a special election should be scheduled if a vacancy occurs on the Board of Supervisors.
- * Delete the requirement that the board conduct at least one meeting annually in every supervisorial district.
- * Eliminate any reference to the court executive officer due to changes in state law making the officer an agent of the state.
- * Eliminate an outdated reference to the term of the county counsel.

About the Writer

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