BETTER
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# Ranked Choice Voting: Better for Cedar Rapids

Better Ballot Iowa (501(c)(3))

## Executive statement

Cedar Rapids should replace its current election system (which requires runoffs when a candidate fails to receive a majority of the votes cast for the office in question during the general election) with a system that uses Ranked Choice Voting.

## Key messages and recommendations

- **Problem:** The current runoff-based voting system in Cedar Rapids is expensive and bad for voter turnout. A plurality win system would be worse, allowing candidates to be elected with a small minority of the vote.

- **Recommendation:** Ranked Choice Voting (RCV,) should be the election system for Cedar Rapids city elections, with Instant Runoff Voting (RCV/IRV) used in single-winner elections and Single Transferable Vote (RCV/STV) for multi-winner elections.

- Even though changing Cedar Rapids city elections to RCV might require state legislation, Cedar Rapids could adopt "trigger language" to adopt RCV should the option become legally available.

- Cedar Rapids' leadership on this issue could pave the way for more Iowa municipalities and encourage the state legislature to pass a "local options" bill, legalizing the use of RCV in municipal elections.

## The current election system is expensive and inefficient

The current laws governing Cedar Rapids City Elections impose unnecessary burdens on Cedar Rapids voters, taxpayers, and candidates. The current law requires runoff elections if any office up for election cannot be filled with candidates who received at least half the votes cast in that race. The law specifies that the runoff election must be held four weeks after the general election, which means that runoff elections occur shortly after Thanksgiving.

The 2021 Election illustrated many of the flaws of the current system. The general election for mayor had four candidates on the ballot. "According to unofficial results, O'Donnell garnered 10,991 votes, Andrews received 7,332 and incumbent Mayor Brad Hart got 7,308."[1] The results were close enough between second and third place to merit a recount of the

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[1] https://www.iowapublicradio.org/ipr-news/2021-11-03/cedar-rapids-mayors-race-heads-to-a-runoff-between-tiffany-odonnell-and-amara-andrews

ballots to determine who would join Tiffany O'Donnell in the runoff election, but former Mayor Hart decided to not ask for a recount.[2] With only four weeks in between the general and runoff, recounts could prevent proper preparation for the runoffs, including campaigning and absentee ballots. The runoff election was held on November 30, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, was estimated to have cost Linn County around $80,000,[3] and was easily won by Tiffany O'Donnell. The number of voters for the runoff (19,898) dropped by over 24% compared to the number for the general election (26,428).

Since Cedar Rapids adopted its charter in 2005, six of the nine city election cycles (and 11 out of 39 races) required runoffs. These runoff elections usually see a drastic drop in turnout, with each of the three runoffs in elections for at-large city council (2005, 2009, 2013) having fewer than half the number of voters as for the general elections. The wasteful requirement for runoffs should be replaced with something better.

## Plurality/Winner-Take-All would be worse

Merely eliminating the runoff and allowing candidates to be elected with a small fraction of the vote would not be the best solution to the problem. That could allow a candidate opposed by a majority of voters to be elected from a large field of candidates, as could be illustrated by the 2005 election for City Council District 3. Despite finishing in first place with 28%, more than 3% ahead of 2nd place in a six-candidate field in the General Election, Sherry Cherry lost by more than 20% in the runoff election, which had a drop of more than 40% in the number of voters from the general election.[4]

## Ranked Choice Voting is the best alternative for Cedar Rapids elections

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) would empower the voters of Cedar Rapids and candidates to ensure that elections are fair and efficient. There are two variations of RCV appropriate for Cedar Rapids city elections. Ranked Choice Voting/Instant Runoff Voting (RCV/IRV) should be used for single-winner elections, such as those for mayor and district city council members, and Ranked Choice Voting/Single Transferable Vote (RCV/STV) should be used to elect multiple at-large city council members in the same election.

Ranked Choice Voting, allows voters to rank candidates in their order of preference—their favorite ranked first, their second choice ranked second, etc. This makes for a more expressive ballot that efficiently conveys nuanced voter opinions and choices.

As in the current system, if any candidate has the majority of first place votes, that candidate is elected. However, if no candidate is immediately elected, RCV/IRV allows the ballots to remain in-play instead of being immediately exhausted and requiring a separate runoff

[2]https://www.kcrg.com/2021/11/05/brad-hart-will-not-ask-recount-cedar-rapids-mayoral-election/
[3]https://www.kcrg.com/2021/11/30/cedar-rapids-mayoral-runoff-election-set-cost-around-80000-while-des-moines-ended-runoffs-2020/
[4]See the Nov. 8, 2005 Regular City Elections Results at  http://linncounty.org/DocumentCenter/View/1014 and the Dec. 6, 2005 Runoff Elections Results at http://linncounty.org/DocumentCenter/View/1015.

election. Instead, the candidate with the fewest first place rankings is eliminated and the votes from any ballots ranking that candidate first instead go to the candidate ranked second on those ballots. Candidates are eliminated round-by-round until a candidate has the majority of votes from non-exhausted ballots.
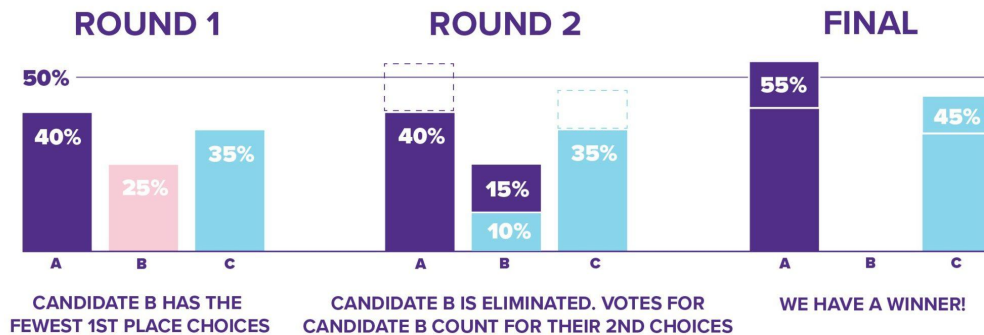


## At-Large City Council members should be elected with RCV/STV

Ranked Choice Voting/Single Transferable Vote (RCV/STV) should be used to elect Cedar Rapids' three at-large city council members in a single election, with Cedar Rapids' other officials elected with Ranked Choice Voting/Instant Runoff Voting (RCV/IRV) in their own races. Using RCV/STV for at-large council members would eliminate the cost of runoff elections, would look consistent for voters using RCV/IRV in other city elections, and would improve the democratic representation of Cedar Rapids' voters.

Current Set-Up: Cedar Rapids has three at-large city council members (in addition to the mayor and five district city council members). In the 2005 election after the adoption of the City Charter, voters elected all three seats in an election (and a runoff for the third seat). The top two in that election received four-year terms and the third place candidate received a two-year term. Elections for one at-large seat were held in 2007, 2011, 2017, and 2021. Elections for two at-large seats were held in 2009, 2013, 2015, and 2019.

(The 2011 charter reform commission recommended that elections should be adjusted so that there were 4 & 5 offices on the ballot in city elections instead of 3 & 6. Reflecting the adjustment, five offices were elected in 2021 (mayor, one at-large, D1, D3, & D5) and four offices were elected in 2019 (two at-large, D2, & D4). To make the adjustment, in the 2013 election, the top candidate for at-large city council got a four-year term and the second-place candidate got a two-year term.)
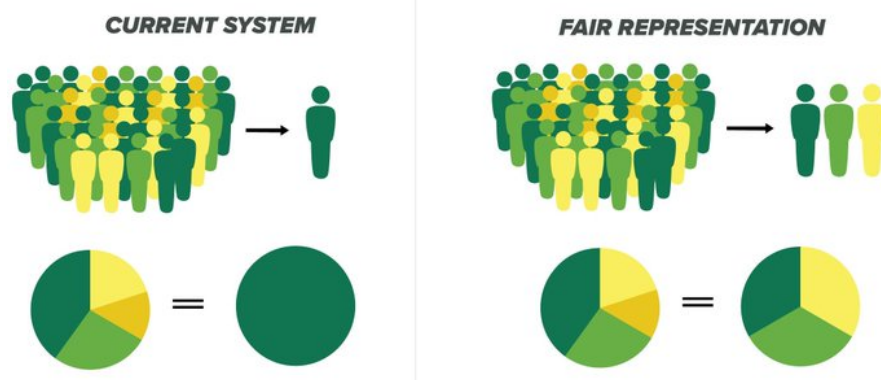
The elections for the at-large city council members have frequently required runoffs that have had huge drop-offs in turnout. Three of the five multi-winner elections for at-large city council have required runoff elections. In each of these runoff elections, there were fewer than half the number of voters compared to the general elections, as shown in the following table:

| | Voters (gen) | Voters (runoff) | % Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2013 (2 seats) | 20,161 | 7,896 | -60.8% |
| 2009 (2nd Seat, 2 vs. 3) | 23,526 | 8,296 | -64.7% |
| 2005 (3rd seat, 3 vs 4) | 25,183 | 11,909 | -52.7% |

At-Large Members Should Be Elected with RCV/STV: RCV/STV is an effective voting method for multi-winner elections, such as electing three members to a council. RCV/STV does not use parties and allows voters to rank individual candidates. RCV/STV is used nationally in Ireland, in the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania, and in Scotland for local elections.

Notably, Minneapolis (which uses similar voting technology as Linn County) uses RCV/STV when electing multiple members to a body, such as electing two members to its Board of Estimate and Taxation and three at-large members of its Parks & Recreation Commission in its 2021 elections[5].

Use of RCV/STV to elect three at-large council members could improve representativeness of Cedar Rapids voters by ensuring that the winners of the elections better reflect all voters, rather than just the largest block of voters.



Further explanation of the advantages of RCV/STV and how it works are in videos at
https://youtu.be/l8XOZJkozfI (CGP Grey)
https://youtu.be/lNxwMdI8OWw (Minnesota Public Radio)
https://youtu.be/M91jraoo6t8 (for Scotland; Electoral Commission UK)

Options for implementing RCV/STV: If Cedar Rapids transitions to using RCV/IRV and RCV/STV for its elections, it has several options. It could leave the elections for all the offices on the current cycle, which would mean that RCV/IRV would be used to elect one at-large member in some city elections and RCV/STV would be used to elect two at-large members in other city elections.

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[5] https://vote.minneapolismn.gov/results-data/election-results/2021/park-board-at-large/

However, the advantages of more proportional representation that can come from RCV/STV would be maximized if all three at-large members are elected in the same election. The current cycle of elections could be altered to allow the elections of four officials in some years and five officials in the other years. The years that elect four officials would elect the mayor and three at-large city council members, and the years with five officials would elect all five district city council members. There would be a nice balance with the four city-wide officials elected in the same year and the other years district-focused elections.

## Cedar Rapids could adopt "Trigger Language" to enact RCV

Some attorneys have suggested that Iowa state law precludes local governments from adopting Ranked Choice Voting for local elections. Assuming this to be the case, Cedar Rapids can amend its charter to adopt RCV for city elections, but with language specifying that the change is to become effective when Iowa state law is changed to allow cities to do so. The mechanism is called trigger language, where the change to RCV for city elections is triggered by a change to state law.

Cedar Rapids can use an approach to RCV similar to an approach Iowa is using with respect to Daylight Savings Time[6]. The Iowa House passed a bill on March 7 to establish Daylight Savings Time as the official time throughout the year. (The bill still needs to be passed by the Iowa Senate and signed by the Governor.) However, states do not have the authority to make that change and the change would require Federal action. Therefore, the bill that was passed contains a section that reads as follows:

> <Sec. ___. CONTINGENT EFFECTIVE DATE. This Act takes effect
> on the date federal legislation is enacted authorizing states
> to adopt daylight saving time as the official time in that
> state throughout the year.>

Similar to this approach, language in the Charter can make the adoption of RCV take effect when Iowa legislation is enacted authorizing Iowa cities to use RCV in their city elections.

Cedar Rapids could then lead in pursuing clearance from the State Legislature. Many states have adopted "Local Options" bills, legalizing RCV for municipal elections. Most recently, Utah's Local Options bill passed with bipartisan support and signed into law in 2021.[7]

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[6] https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ba=HF%202331
[7] https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2021/03/06/utah-lawmakers-expand/

## Ranked Choice Voting elections are already administered in jurisdictions with election infrastructure similar to that of Linn County
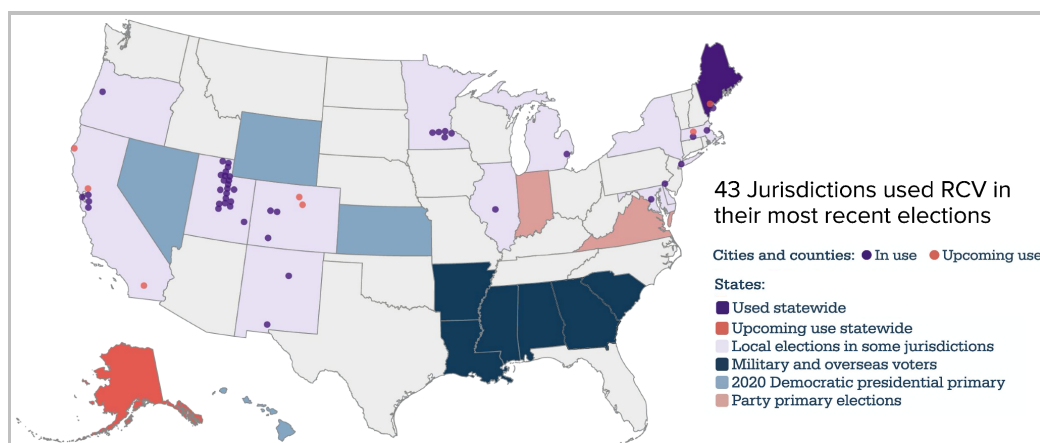
Linn County uses ES&S Digital Scan 200 optical scan voting equipment.[8] This equipment is not only compatible with Ranked Choice Elections[9], but is also used by Minneapolis/Hennepin County, which effectively handles much larger RCV/IRV and RCV/STV elections.[10] It has been said that the only change necessary would be updated software. It has been estimated that the recurring costs of an RCV election would be a few thousand dollars, with a one- or two-time cost of roughly $40,000 for voter education and staff/volunteer training. This is much less than the cost of a single runoff election. Included in the Appendix of this document are three ES&S-compatible sample ballots.

## Ranked Choice Voting elections are secure and fully auditable

RCV and STV have been used in Ireland and Australia for over a century. With decades of experience in the US, there are well-established best practices for ballot design and election audits. FairVote and the RCV Resource Center have compiled data on these best practices.[11]

## Ranked Choice is used throughout the US and is gaining ground

In 2021, a record number of US municipalities used Ranked Choice Voting. Three more municipalities (Broomfield, CO; Westbrook, ME; Anni Arbor, MI) adopted RCV through popular referenda. In addition to 50 jurisdictions (9.6 million voters) using RCV nationwide, the states of Alaska and Maine have adopted RCV for state and/or Federal elections. Seven states used RCV for absentee and military ballots. Additionally, state parties are using RCV for conventions and party primaries, including the Virginia and Utah GOP conventions.
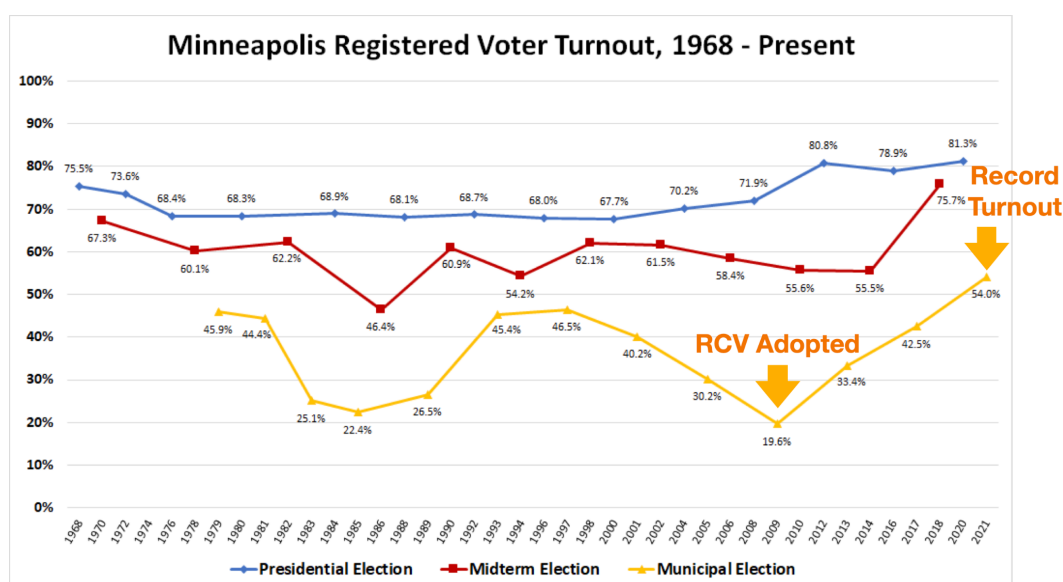


43 Jurisdictions used RCV in their most recent elections

Cities and counties: ● In use ● Upcoming use
States:
■ Used statewide
■ Upcoming use statewide
■ Local elections in some jurisdictions
■ Military and overseas voters
■ 2020 Democratic presidential primary
■ Party primary elections

[8] https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/covotesystem.pdf
[9] https://www.rcvresources.org/iowa-state-assessment
[10] https://www.sos.state.mn.us/media/4444/2020-voting-equipment-map.pdf
[11] https://www.fairvote.org/rcv_administration
https://civicdesign.org/projects/rcv/
https://www.rcvresources.org/policymakers

# Ranked Choice Voting is popular with voters across the political spectrum

Polling in Utah, where RCV was adopted by 20 municipalities in 2021, showed that voters found the system to be simple and popular.[12] NYC had record turnout and polls showed a vast majority of voters were happy with the system.[13]

Use of RCV in Minneapolis allowed a 17-candidate mayoral election to be resolved efficiently and without a runoff. After adopting RCV in 2009, municipal voter turnout increased every election to its present record level in 2021. These trends are observed in many other municipalities throughout the country—competitive RCV elections draw more voters to the ballot box.[14]

Ranked Choice Voting is an issue that enjoys broad support across the political spectrum and has been implemented in both red jurisdictions, like Utah and Alaska, as well as blue locals like NYC and San Francisco.



Source: City of Minneapolis, Elections & Voter Services (annotated by Better Ballot Iowa)
https://vote.minneapolismn.gov/results-data/turnout/

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[12]https://www.deseret.com/utah/2021/11/15/22783224/did-utahns-like-ranked-choice-voting-a-new-poll-has-answers-elections-2021-local-politics-election
[13]https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/decision-2021/2021/06/09/exclusive--80-percent-of-voters-comfortable-using-ranked-choice-voting--ny1-ipsos-poll-finds
[14]https://www.fairvote.org/research_rcvvoterturnout

# Appendix: Sample Ballots

This sample ballot from Maine is compatible with the ES&S voting machines used by Linn County:

**State of Maine Sample Ballot**
**General Election, November 3, 2020**

**Instructions to Voters**

To vote, fill in the oval like this ⬤

To rank your candidate choices, fill in the oval:

- In the 1st column for your 1st choice candidate.
- In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice candidate, and so on.

Continue until you have ranked as many or as few candidates as you like.

Fill in no more than one oval for each candidate or column.

To rank a Write-in candidate, write the person's name in the write-in space and fill in the oval for the ranking of your choice.

| President Vice President | 1st Choice | 2nd Choice | 3rd Choice | 4th Choice | 5th Choice | 6th Choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biden, Joseph R. Harris, Kamala D. Democratic | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| De La Fuente, Roque "Rocky" Richardson, Darcy G. Alliance Party | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| Hawkins, Howard Walker, Angela Nicole Green Independent | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| Jorgensen, Jo Cohen, Jeremy Libertarian | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| Trump, Donald J. Pence, Michael R. Republican | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| Write-in | O | O | O | O | O | O |

| U.S. Senator | 1st Choice | 2nd Choice | 3rd Choice | 4th Choice | 5th Choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Collins, Susan Margaret Bangor Republican | O | O | O | O | O |
| Gideon, Sara I. Freeport Democratic | O | O | O | O | O |
| Linn, Max Patrick Bar Harbor Independent | O | O | O | O | O |
| Savage, Lisa Solon Independent | O | O | O | O | O |
| Write-in | O | O | O | O | O |

| Rep. to Congress District 2 | 1st Choice | 2nd Choice | 3rd Choice |
|---|---|---|---|
| Crafts, Dale John Lisbon Republican | O | O | O |
| Golden, Jared F. Lewiston Democratic | O | O | O |
| Write-in | O | O | O |

**Turn Over for Additional Contests**

So are the following ballots from the Millcreek, Utah municipal election:

**OFFICIAL BALLOT**
MUNICIPAL GENERAL ELECTION
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2021

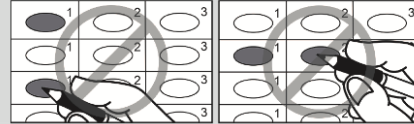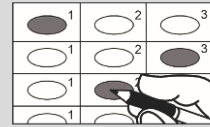Ballot 38 - Type 38 - BC- English -
Default - MIL001

**RANKED CHOICE VOTING INSTRUCTIONS:**
To rank your candidates, fill in the oval next to their name:
- In the 1st column for your 1st choice candidate
- In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice candidate, and so on

Do not fill in more than one oval:
- In a column
- For a candidate

You may rank as many or as few candidates as you like, and you are not required to rank all candidates. If you skip a ranking, subsequent choice(s) in that contest will not be counted. If you make a mistake, mark the ballot so your intent is clear. Do not initial or sign the correction.

| MUNICIPAL |
|---|

**MILLCREEK**

CITY RECORDER

**MILLCREEK COUNCIL DISTRICT 2**
**RANKED CHOICE VOTING:** Rank up to Four candidates.

| | 1 First choice | 2 Second choice | 3 Third choice | 4 Fourth choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LYNDA BAGLEY-GIBSON | ◯ 1 | ◯ 2 | ◯ 3 | ◯ 4 |
| THOM DESIRANT | ◯ 1 | ◯ 2 | ◯ 3 | ◯ 4 |
| ANGEL VICE | ◯ 1 | ◯ 2 | ◯ 3 | ◯ 4 |
| JEREMIAH CLARK | ◯ 1 | ◯ 2 | ◯ 3 | ◯ 4 |

**END OF BALLOT**

**OFFICIAL BALLOT**
MUNICIPAL GENERAL ELECTION
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2021

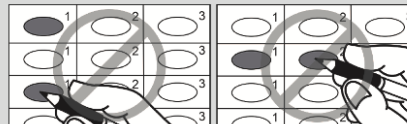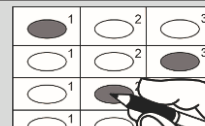Ballot 39 - Type 39 - BC- English - Default - MIL026

**RANKED CHOICE VOTING INSTRUCTIONS:**
To rank your candidates, fill in the oval next to their name:
- In the 1st column for your 1st choice candidate
- In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice candidate, and so on

Do not fill in more than one oval:
- In a column
- For a candidate

You may rank as many or as few candidates as you like, and you are not required to rank all candidates. If you skip a ranking, subsequent choice(s) in that contest will not be counted. If you make a mistake, mark the ballot so your intent is clear. Do not initial or sign the correction.

| MUNICIPAL |
|---|
| **MILLCREEK** |
| CITY RECORDER |

**MILLCREEK COUNCIL DISTRICT 4**
**RANKED CHOICE VOTING:** Rank up to Four candidates.

| | 1 First choice | 2 Second choice | 3 Third choice | 4 Fourth choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| BRUCE PARKER | ○ 1 | ○ 2 | ○ 3 | ○ 4 |
| BEV UIPI | ○ 1 | ○ 2 | ○ 3 | ○ 4 |
| REX WILLIAMS | ○ 1 | ○ 2 | ○ 3 | ○ 4 |
| BEVERLY BOYCE | ○ 1 | ○ 2 | ○ 3 | ○ 4 |

**END OF BALLOT**