

LOCAL NEWS

St. Paul City Council Member Dai Thao resigns, to take new position in Florida



St. Paul City Council member Dai Thao outside the City Council offices at City Hall in downtown St. Paul on Thursday July 7, 2022. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

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St. Paul City Council Member Dai Thao will step down from his elected office to serve as executive director of a faith-based social justice organization in Sarasota, Florida.

The city council will review applications and appoint an interim council member to complete the remainder of his term through 2023. A call for applications will soon be announced.

Thao issued a written statement Thursday saying he will vacate his Ward 1 office on Aug. 1 to lead Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity. The organization conducted a nationwide search spanning more than a year, according to a statement from its board of directors quoted in Thao's announcement.

"I've got family down there," said Thao, in a brief interview on Thursday. "We're just going to let the council do its process, like we've always done. Hopefully this person that the council appoints doesn't run for the office (in 2023), [like what happened in Ward 6 in 2019](#)."

MAKING ST. PAUL HISTORY



Volunteer Julie Lo videos Dai Thao, St. Paul mayoral candidate, as he speaks live on Facebook to his followers from the Rice Street Public Library in St. Paul, October 24, 2017. (Scott Takushi: Pioneer Press)

Thao, a former organizer with TakeAction Minnesota and the [city's first Hmong council member](#), was first elected in November 2013, replacing then-interim council member Nathaniel Khaliq, who was appointed the previous summer when Melvin Carter III resigned to take a position with the Minnesota Department of Education. Carter would go on to be elected mayor in 2017, a position Thao also sought that year in a crowded ranked-choice



Thao's campaigns for office drew more attention than most. In October 2018, a Ramsey County District Court judge [found Thao unlikely to be found guilty of criminal charges](#) that he violated election law by entering a voting booth to help an illiterate Hmong elder cast a ballot for him. The judge noted that while he may have violated state law, those regulations [appeared to be in conflict with federal election law](#).

The charges were later dismissed, and Thao then joined fellow St. Paul City Council Member Nelsie Yang in filing legal action against the state for limiting the number of times an interpreter could assist voters in the voting booth. Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon and Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison [later issued a consent decree in "Thao v. Simon"](#) agreeing that the provision of Minnesota election law was unenforceable under the federal Voting Rights Act. A prohibition against candidates assisting voters was also dropped.

"We were able to change the statute," Thao said.

WARD 1



Dai Thao receives a handshake from St. Paul city clerk Shari Moore, left, after she swore him in as the city's first Hmong-American council member Thursday, Nov. 21, 2013 in the council chamber at City Hall in St. Paul. (John Doman / Pioneer Press)

Spanning a large swathe of the Green Line corridor along University Avenue from Snelling Avenue to the State Capitol, Ward 1 includes Frogtown, Summit-University, some of Union Park and a portion of the North End.



In his written statement, Thao said he was proud of the work his office had helped accomplish hand-in-hand with the community, from new city ordinances around earned sick and safe time, paid parental leave and a \$15 minimum wage to planning around affordable housing and a professional soccer stadium, Allianz Field, in the Midway.

Thao has served since 2015 on the St. Paul Port Authority, which oversees major economic redevelopment projects such as the former Hillcrest golf course on the city's East Side.

"As St. Paul's first council member of Hmong descent, it has truly been an honor of a lifetime to serve and work for the resilient and hard-working residents of Ward 1," said the council member, in his written statement. "I believe all the progress, results and achievements we have accomplished in Ward 1 were through our faith and belief in each other, that our diversity is our strength, and that united we can win the issues. I am confident that Ward 1 will continue to reap the benefits of the policies we have pushed for together."

He added a message to the children of Ward 1: "I believe if a once starving refugee boy who couldn't speak English, who grew up poor in the projects, who was raised by a single mother, who is not very tall, who is very average could become a council member and change the course of Ward 1, then you, too, can become any leader you wish to become for our ward, schools, city and country."





St. Paul City Council member Dai Thao in Council chambers at City Hall in downtown St. Paul on Thursday July 7, 2022. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

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County courts before switching focus to the St. Paul mayor's office, city council, and all things neighborhood-related, from the city's churches to its parks and light rail. A resident of Hamline-Midway, he is married to a Frogtown woman. He Tweets with manic intensity at @FrederickMelo.

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