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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

# Interim Cook County Administrator Appointed

**October 22, 2024** – The Cook County Board of Commissioners has difficult and heartbreaking news to share but wants to inform the community about the unfortunate situation and how they are dealing with related issues.

County Administrator James Joerke recently took some time off to personally handle an out-of-state family illness. Immediately upon his return last Saturday, he received the devastating news that his wife had been the victim of an accident in Kansas City, MO. She died three days later succumbing to her injuries.

The Board and all of the Cook County employees would like to extend their heartfelt sympathy and support to James and his family during this difficult time as they deal with their tragedy. Administrator Joerke is provided a leave of up to 12 weeks to attend to this situation.

Per Statute 375A.06, it is the Board's responsibility to appoint an Interim County Administrator to ensure that county business can move forward with integrity, and without interruption.

For additional support, the Board called on key Cook County leaders to take on additional responsibilities in certain areas. Auditor Treasurer Braidy Powers will oversee the Budget, Financial Management Plan and the Facilities Committee. County Attorney Molly Hicken will oversee all County contracts. HR Director Allison Plummer will handle personnel issues.

During the Tuesday, October 22 Cook County Board Commissioners meeting, a special item was added to the agenda to address these issues. Per Minnesota Statute 13D.05, Subdivision 3 (b) the Board broke for a closed meeting to discuss the private aspects of the topic, prior to reconvening.

Commissioner Chairperson Ann Sullivan opened the discussion regarding appointing an Interim County Administrator to fill in during the Administrator's absence. Considerations included Auditor Treasurer Braidy Powers, County Attorney Molly Hicken and County Management Information Systems (MIS) Director Rowan Watkins. Commissioner Sullivan said that she had also received a text message from previous Interim Administrator (Rena Rogers) in which she expressed her willingness to help. Rogers served in that role following the departure of the previous County Administrator (during COVID). With the upcoming election which Braidy Powers oversees, it was deemed critical that he focus on ensuring the integrity of the election process. Regarding Molly Hicken, there were reservations about the potential for conflicts of interest from a legal perspective. The board then discussed the experience, strengths and merits of Rowan Watkins as a very knowledgeable person of integrity and learned of his willingness to step into the interim role. Watkins was called in to confirm his willingness and that his MIS staff is well positioned to manage their responsibilities during this interim period. He did have some concerns if the interim period were to be extended, but he was comfortable with the "give or take" of a few weeks. The Board then unanimously



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passed the motion to appoint Rowan Watkins as the Interim Cook County Administrator. An “out of class” appointment was then approved regarding compensation for the position during the interim period.

There was additional discussion as to what may happen, should this period extend beyond 12 weeks. Braidy Powers suggested that the Board have ongoing discussions about “what if” possibilities.

The Board will continue to share updates with the community as new information becomes available.

### **About Cook County, MN**

Cook County encompasses the sovereign nation of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa; the City of Grand Marais; the Townships of Lutsen, Tofte and Schroeder; and unincorporated areas in the easternmost part of Minnesota’s North Shore. Cook County Government values transparency and strives to deliver superior services and programs in a fiscally responsible way. We value the dignity of all County residents and seek to create a community that provides opportunity for all. Many of our offices are in the Cook County Courthouse at 411 W 2<sup>nd</sup> St, Grand Marais 55604. Other departments and facilities, such as the Airport, Community Center, Highway and Sheriff are located nearby. Call 218-387-3000 or visit: <https://co.cook.mn.us>

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