

Summary of Meeting with Keesha Gaskins

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, July 3, 2008

Guest Speaker: Keesha Gaskins, Executive Director, League of Women Voters Minnesota

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Charles Clay, Diane Flynn, Paul Gilje, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting--Today's meeting is one of several with thought leaders in Minnesota concerning elections, an area of interest very close to the League of Women Voters of Minnesota (LWVMN).

B. Welcome and introductions--Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Keesha Gaskins**, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters Minnesota. Gaskins, has a law degree from Northeastern University School of Law, Boston, MA, formerly was a litigation attorney in the Twin Cities area. Her immediately previous position was executive director of the Minnesota Women's Political Caucus. She's a graduate of Jefferson High School, Bloomington, MN. During Gaskins' comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Judicial independence study--The League of Women Voters Minnesota's judicial study is complete. Gaskins said the study supports retention elections for judges as well as criteria to evaluate judges. The study was begun before the Quie commission issued its report. Gaskins acknowledged that some people have asked why the system for selecting judges should be changed because Minnesota has yet to experience the expensive, highly-partisan campaigns for judge that have characterized other states, including Wisconsin. It's much better, she said, to make changes before citizens have lost trust in the judiciary, rather than after. It's more difficult to regain trust than to retain trust, she said.

2. Campaign finance reform--The League of Women Voters is working closely with Common Cause on finding ways to limit influence of money in politics, Gaskins said. The only way to combat the ability of independent groups to make unlimited contributions on behalf of specific candidates would be some way to offset such contributions with public money for their opponents, she said.

Gaskins said she's not sure there's a constitutional way to limit the large campaign expenditures by the Republican and Democratic caucuses of the Minnesota House and Senate.

3. League of Women Voters approach to taking positions on issues--According to its website, every two years at the League of Women Voters Minnesota State Convention, the delegation adopts a study to be conducted over the next two years. A study committee is appointed of League members from throughout the state of Minnesota. The committee researches the topic, organizes informational meetings and public forums, writes a report, and produces study guides. At the end of the study period, Local Leagues discuss the subject and give input to the committee which is used to form the League's position on the issue.

At the Convention in 2007, the League adopted a re-study on the Selection of Judges.

Previous studies: 2005-2007: [Minnesota Pollution Control Agency](#); 2003-2005: [Alternate Voting Systems](#); 2001-2003: [Immigration in Minnesota](#); 1999-2001: [Sustainable Agriculture](#); 1997-1999: [Election of Judges](#); 1995-1997: [Minnesota State Spending](#); 1993-1995: [Financing State Government](#).

Copies of these studies are available on the League of Women Voters website. The principles in these studies form the basis of the League of Women Voters' position on specific legislation, Gaskins said.

4. Membership challenges--The League of Women Voters is experiencing membership challenges, Gaskins said, because it needs to attract younger women. The organization has an identity problem, she said, because people aren't necessarily attracted to a "league of women voters." Many women who become active while in college don't remain in the organization in the location where they attended college, she said. Currently the state organization has about 2,000 members, of which one-half are in the Twin Cities metro area and one-half in the rest of the state.

Asked whether membership can increase, Gaskins replied that she doesn't believe the desire for civics education is any different today from years past. The vast majority of people yearn for the same things, she said, such as good schools and a safe community.

5. Concerns about Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)--Gaskins personally is not excited by IRV, in which voters rank candidates in order of preference. Most people of color wouldn't get elected under IRV, she believes. Further, in at-large races where more than one person is elected, Gaskins doesn't think IRV would survive constitutional scrutiny. FairVote Minnesota is doing an effective job of organizing around IRV, but she thinks that people don't understand the concept. Her concern is that communities that are frequently impacted by lack of public education campaigns will be disenfranchised if there are not sufficient and targeted education efforts around how IRV works. It was noted that San Francisco apparently has successfully used IRV, but Gaskins said the demographics there are different from Minneapolis-St. Paul.

LWVMN supports the option to use Instant Runoff Voting to elect State or Local Officials in single seat elections. LWVMN also supports the continued use of the plurality voting system in our elections.

The LWVMN Board reserves the right to decide the appropriateness of legislation proposing to replace the plurality voting system with the Instant Runoff System at the state level.

LWVMN strongly supports the right of local governments and municipalities to choose Instant Runoff Voting for their own local elections.

Voters need to understand how votes in an election are tabulated and how a candidate actually wins an election. If a change in elections systems occurs, LWVMN strongly supports adequate voter education.

LWVMN does not support Approval, Borda Count, or Condorcet as alternative voting systems.

6. Possible chances in precinct caucuses and party endorsement--Gaskins said she is largely satisfied with the present system. The ability to conduct fair and effective precinct caucuses, she said, is largely an internal matter for the political parties.

A Civic Caucus member wondered whether caucuses and party endorsement seem to be captured more by voters and candidates on the more extreme wings of the political parties, with moderates largely left out.

7. Racism in Minnesota--Gaskins said that Minnesota, whose residents usually view themselves as progressive, is among the most racist states in the nation in terms of delivery of social services to children. She cited data from the Children's Defense Fund Children's Defense Fund Minnesota's Annual KIDS COUNT Data Book and the Women's Foundation report on the Status of Girls in Minnesota indicating the large number of underserved children in the state.

8. Support for transit legislation--Gaskins said the League of Women Voters in Minnesota has strong positions to increase public transit and to reduce urban sprawl. The organization testified in favor of

major transportation legislation that was enacted in 2008. When six Republican legislators went against their caucus and supported the bill, the League thanked them for their courage.

9. Concern for the environment--Responding to a question, Gaskins said that environmental concerns are a very high priority for the League of Women Voters.

10. Changes in redistricting--The League of Women Voters has a huge interest in redistricting, Gaskins said. First, the League is deeply concerned about making sure that an accurate census occurs, counting all people, including immigrants.

The League has no current position on any pending proposed legislation regarding redistricting changes. Gaskins said she is opposed to the fact that only retired judges--mainly white males--would sit on the commission drawing the boundaries in the proposal prepared by the Carlson-Mondale group at the Humphrey Institute.

11. Getting out the vote on the constitutional amendment--The League of Women Voters Minnesota will be working hard, Gaskins said, to make sure that the public understands how voting on the clean water land and legacy constitutional amendment operates. In Minnesota the passage of a constitutional amendment requires a majority of all persons voting in the election, not just those who choose to vote on the ballot measure. The effect is that if a person goes to the polls but doesn't cast a vote on the measure, the effect is the same as if the individual votes no.

12. Whether the Legislature should have submitted the amendment--In response to a question about whether the Legislature is abdicating its decision-making role by throwing an issue to the people rather than deciding the issue itself, Gaskins replied that the matter has been decided. The issue of whether a tax increase should be put to the voters rather than to the legislature was appropriately fought during the last legislative session. Those who were against it did not prevail.

The issue before Minnesotans now is whether or not to vote for the substantive constitutional amendment. In her opinion, to vote no because a person believes it should have never been a constitutional amendment, assuming a person otherwise supports the substantive intent of the amendment, would be tantamount to cutting off one's nose to spite your face. The defeat of the amendment would undoubtedly be used as an argument to limit future funding for both arts and the environment.

13. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Gaskins for meeting with us today.