

Summary of meeting with State Sen. Terri Bonoff

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, July 10, 2009

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; David Broden, Janis Clay, Marianne Curry, Diane Flynn, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Dwight Johnson, Tim McDonald, Dan Loritz (by phone), John Mooty, Wayne Popham, Clarence Shallbetter, and Bob White

A. Context of the meeting: The Civic Caucus scheduled today's meeting to discuss possible options for the Civic Caucus work program during the 2010 state Governor-Legislature campaign. In addition State Sen. Bonoff is present. Bonoff had been scheduled to meet with the Civic Caucus a few months ago, but couldn't participate at that time because of a family emergency.

B. Discussion of Civic Caucus work program--During discussion of a memo outlining opportunities for the upcoming campaign for Governor-Legislature, the following points were raised:

1. Don't lose sight of the Legislature--Don't forget that 201 legislative races will be occurring as well as the Governor's race, a member cautioned. Candidates for Legislature need to be addressing the same kinds of questions as candidates for Governor.

2. Recognize the role of citizens and business and community organizations--Another member noted that all kinds of organizations will be holding meetings with candidates. We might be able to help by providing background information and by urging that certain questions be addressed to candidates. Also we need to be alert to helpful articles in the media, such as a three-part MinnPost feature on the state's economy this past week.

3. Impact on counties, school districts, and cities--We need to keep in mind the immense change that has occurred--because of increased state support--in the relationship between units of local government (counties, school districts and cities) and the state, a member said. For years those units of government were related chiefly to their local voters. But now, because of changes in funding, they're spending all their time at the Legislature seeking money.

4. Greater influence from the interest groups--In light of the changes in state-local funding, State Sen. Bonoff noted that certain interest groups are now experiencing greater influence, because they can deal with one institution, the State Legislature, not with hundreds of units of local government. These interest groups play a significant role in making campaign contributions to candidates for the Legislature, she said.

Another member said that the area of health and human services is rife with special interests confronting the Legislature. It's astounding to see the parade, the member said, of all the organizations that are seeking funds for their individual special needs.

5. Concentrate on major issues--The Civic Caucus ought to concentrate on major issues and not so much on how candidates might describe their leadership abilities, as outlined in the memo this morning, a member advised.

6. Approaching issues relating to the state's economy--We ought to be exploring more what might be done to encourage private investment, such as streamlining red tape, than what government might do directly with various financing schemes, a member suggested.

7. Don't expect too much from interviews with candidates for Governor--We ought to recognize that interviewing candidates might not elicit as much benefit as might be hoped, a member said. Candidates have two major objectives, the member said, (1) to raise campaign money and (2) to speak very cautiously on issues, probably from carefully crafted scripts, to avoid alienating as many potential supporters as possible.

Also, a member said, we need to remember that whatever leadership qualities we might hope should be present in candidates for Governor don't necessarily bear a relationship to what the political parties will be seeking.

Bonoff, who after eight ballots had lost out on seeking DFL endorsement for Congress in 2008, urged the Civic Caucus to take steps that would help promote an enlightened, frank, statewide discussion of issues in the campaign.

Another member said there is considerable merit in the Civic Caucus interviewing candidates and distributing summaries of these interviews widely, even though candidates might be overly cautious in their responses to some questions.

8. More emphasis on where the state is going?--Rather than emphasizing so much an effort to interview candidates, maybe our role should be directed more to stressing the fact that the state faces innumerable challenges and that those challenges must be addressed in the campaign, a member suggested. In effect, the question is whether we might serve more as a resource to the candidates and the state.

9. Don't overlook the need for leadership on the civic side--We seem to be concentrating so much on the importance of political leadership, a member said. However, we've also acknowledged that community leaders are very important. Without respected spokespersons from the private sector, we might not get great leadership in the public sector.

Another member chimed in by reminding the group that we need to educate the general public about civic responsibility. Some people have sense it is their duty to be active in public affairs.

10. Is there widespread ignorance about how the American republic works?--As the group discussed the incredible growth of social media, a member inquired how use of social media might contribute to improving what might be widespread ignorance of how state and federal governments are structured and how the nation's economy works.

11. Be very strategic in whom we talk with--A member advised that with one major meeting a week the Civic Caucus needs to be very strategic in making sure we make effective use of each meeting. Thus, we need to set priorities very carefully in deciding whom to invite to meet with us as well as setting priorities on what issues we focus on in each meeting.

Rather than just meeting with candidates, perhaps we ought to consider meeting with knowledgeable people who could provide excellent counsel to the candidates, a member said. Thereby the Civic Caucus would be functioning more as a resource for candidates than serving as a place for intensive questioning on their views.

12. Developments in "Teach for America"--Diane Flynn, who lives in the Bay area of San Francisco, near Stanford University, said that 40 percent of this spring's Stanford grads have no jobs. She cited great job opportunity in "Teach for America". Teach for America (<http://www.teachforamerica.org/mission/index.htm>) recruits outstanding recent college graduates and working professionals from all backgrounds and career interests to commit to teach for at least two years in urban and rural public schools.

C. Conversation with Terri Bonoff--The group moved on to discussion with State Sen. Terri Bonoff, Minnetonka. Verne and Paul introduced Bonoff, Democrat, who was elected to the State Senate in a special election in 2005. A resident of Minnetonka, and graduate of Clark University, Bonoff formerly served on the Minnetonka Planning Commission. She is a former marketing executive with Navarre Corporation. Bonoff had agreed to meet with the Civic Caucus to discuss education during the 2009 legislative session, but a family emergency made it necessary to postpone meeting with the Civic Caucus. During Bonoff's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. A disappointing end to the 2009 session --Bonoff noted her letter to the editor of the Star Tribune on May 22, in which she stated that reaching consensus would have been possible only if legislative leaders,

including the Governor, had been unequivocally committed to reaching consensus. As she put it, "I can only hypothesize that they believe so strongly in the merits of their viewpoints that compromise seemed worse for Minnesotans than deadlock. I heartily disagree."

2. Improving education--Bonoff said she carried a Teach for America bill, which passed the Senate but died in the House. She blamed opposition from the teachers' union. Bonoff said that the business side of school districts needs significant improvement. You'd not see every Target store applying its own unique structure for keeping track of revenues and expenditures, but something similar to that prevails in schools, where school districts all have different revenue-expenditure systems, Bonoff said.

3. Budget problem could have been settled-- Bonoff said she promoted an alternative solution which leaders wouldn't consider. Toward the end, she said, a \$2.5 billion problem remained. A combination of accounting shifts for education and a tax on clothing would have settled the session, she said. Extending the sales tax to clothing would have produced \$750 million over two years, with accounting shifts handling the balance. But her caucus would not support this approach. Bonoff said she didn't agree with increasing the state income tax on higher income individuals, although she voted for this approach at the end of the day due to her belief that more revenue was imperative and this was the only solution on the table.

During discussion it was noted that in 1967 a Citizens League committee headed by David Graven, Democrat, and John Mooty, Republican, proposed a state sales tax with broad coverage, including clothing, combined with an income tax credit for lower income individuals. Subsequently the Legislature in 1967 passed the first state sales tax but exempted clothing from the tax.

A Civic Caucus member suggested that legislators ought to seek agreement by asking themselves whether the objective--to produce a budget agreement--is more important than negative side effects, such as, taxing clothing, which isn't as acceptable to some legislators than an increase in the state income tax.

Bill Frenzel, who served both in the State Legislature and in Congress was asked what needs to be done to produce consensus. Frenzel replied that the various parties are frozen in their positions and won't move. He said people are failing to see the impact of inaction on their children and grandchildren.

Perhaps, a member said, in light of strong, non-yielding positions by elected officials of different parties, conditions in the state might actually get worse before they get better.

4. Refine questions and lists of invitees--Toward the end of the meeting members suggested that we should look carefully at who we'll be inviting to meet with us as well as refining a list of major state issues. Such steps ought to take priority over starting any series of meetings with candidates, a member said. Members were urging that we ought to start by extending invitations to knowledgeable individuals outside government.

5. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus Verne thanked Bonoff for meeting with us today.