

Summary of Civic Caucus discussion on major Minnesota Issues

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, June 12, 2009

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; David Broden, Janis Clay, David Durenberger (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Jan Hively (by phone), Dan Loritz (by phone), Tim McDonald, John Mooty, and Bob White

A. New member--Janis Clay was introduced as secretary-treasurer of the Civic Caucus Board of Directors.

B. Update on Citizens League meeting--Jan Hively, Tim McDonald, and Paul Gilje reported on their attendance at a breakfast meeting yesterday when Stacy Becker outlined a new civic engagement strategy of the Citizens League. A key part of that strategy makes citizens important policy makers in their own right.

C. Discussion of key issues facing Minnesota--Verne explained that the Civic Caucus this summer will hold discussions on its strategic plan, with today one of the first such discussions. We're concentrating today on key issues facing the state, with no consideration today of whether the Civic Caucus would be involved in any issue. The group began by evaluating whether elected leaders are offering innovative ideas for addressing state issues. During comments the following points were raised:

1. An eye-opener for a new resident--A member said that a respected health care leader from another state came to Minnesota several years ago thinking that the state had adequate leadership to implement creative ideas. But, the individual was sad to see that Minnesota's leaders--unlike previous reputations--were not open to innovative change as the individual had expected. The referred to health care leader is a risk taker who believes that government can be accountable and leadership can be responsible.

2. Looking for hope elsewhere--Another member noted that we're seeing leadership in less bureaucratic areas, such as individuals cited by Peter Heegaard in his book, "[Heroes Among Us: Social Entrepreneurs Strengthening Families and Building Communities](#)". The individual also said that in years past business leaders were more convinced that they would succeed if their community were active and progressive. He doesn't find many business leaders with such thoughts today.

3. Lack of emphasis on the state itself--Another factor, a member said, is that there is greater consideration of issues globally, nationally and regionally today. We don't think as much about issues only a state basis.

4. Absence of innovation--To be a noteworthy state requires that the state be doing noteworthy things, a member said. Where are things happening that are noteworthy?

5. Leadership in non-political communities--A member observed that while political leadership might be lacking, we certainly can see that Minnesota's arts and sports institutions are far stronger they were 30 years ago.

6. Impact of federal involvement--A member wondered whether growing federal involvement might be a strong indicator of a shift in leadership from the state to the federal level. Major public investments today usually have a strong federal component. Moreover, it will be very likely that the main impetus for many investments has come chiefly from federal officials.

7. Diminishing leadership in community organizations?--A member asked whether we no longer are seeing as many creative ideas bubbling up in the private and non-profit sector; instead there seems to be a feeling that governments are both initiating and deciding. Another member noted that our state Legislature--with (a) its frequent sessions, (b) more members who regard the Legislature as their full-time employment, and (c) more professional legislative staffing--might be less oriented to considering proposals from the outside.

8. Have leaders abandoned Minnesota for the Sunbelt?--Minnesota formerly was regarded as a place to which workers wanted to come, despite the state's climate, a member said. But today it seems as if we're losing people to the Sunbelt, particularly those who find it advantageous from a tax standpoint to maintain a Sunbelt residence at least six months and one day each year. Minnesotans, the member said, need to find a way to reverse the move of economic and political to other locations. In further discussions, a member said that so long as people felt they were getting better services for the money, they were willing to pay higher taxes in Minnesota. But there's been a change in attitude about whether, for example, we're getting more for our investment in education.

9. Tough requirements coming for elected officials--Members referred to a column by David Brooks in the *New York Times* yesterday: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/opinion/12brooks.html?_r=1. Brooks' message is that politicians will have to persuade voters "to postpone gratification for the sake of rebuilding the country."

10. Defining problems as well as proposing solutions--In many cases, it was suggested, there's not been enough attention to defining problems before solutions are advanced. The greatest contribution some groups might make is to concentrate first on stating the problem clearly, rather than carrying around a solution in search of a problem.

11. A polarized political atmosphere doesn't help--We're hobbled here, too, a member said, by strong partisan divisions that make consensus-building and finding agreement on innovative solutions much more difficult. Moreover, a caucus/convention system that all but precludes an open primary for candidates tends to produce legislators more oriented to partisan divisions.

12. An opportunity in the current campaign for Governor?--It was noted that the 2009-2010 campaign for Governor represents an ideal time for intelligent discussions about leadership and the key issues facing Minnesota. There'll be no incumbent; there are host of

candidates and potential candidates from the parties; there's no Presidential or U.S. Senate race, so the focus can be on Minnesota issues only. Perhaps we should consider outlining central questions that need to be addressed by every candidate.

13. Will precinct caucuses have a chilling effect on frank discussion of issues?--

Over the next several months candidates for Governor will be working hard to get commitments from citizens who will be attending precinct caucuses. They'll know that without precinct caucus support, a candidate won't have the necessary party support, with financing. Thus, a member suggested, we might find candidates will be extremely reluctant to take strong positions on tough issues, fearing loss of caucus supporters.

Or, the positions they take might more reflect the views of single purpose or extreme interests who are most highly motivated to attend the caucuses.

14. Whether new and traditional media will carry information on issues--At least two major problems seem present in whether citizens can rely on new and traditional media as sources of information, a member said. One problem is a tendency to report the campaign essentially as a horse race--who's ahead, who's behind, how far--rather than explaining for voters the substance of various issues being discussed. Another problem is how millions or billions of short messages shared among individuals around the state will somehow help inform themselves about any given issue.

15. Potential of respected organizations--Think about the highly-regarded Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, a member said. That group holds in-depth discussions with public figures and could be a leader in articulating central issues that candidates for Governor ought to be addressing.

16. What does it mean to be Governor?--It's important, a member said, to make sure candidates do more than simply comment on issues. Candidates need to be asked broader questions about the nature of the office, such as "What does it mean to be Governor". Such questions would help bring the matter of leadership to the forefront.

17. What kind of organization might have real credibility to 'hold candidates' feet to the fire'?--Toward the end of the meeting, the group discussed possibilities for what kind of organization, led by what kind of individuals, might have the most credibility in bringing the matter of leadership, along with intelligent discussion of issues, to the forefront in the campaign for Governor. Existing organizations were mentioned, along with the possibility of some new movement, perhaps led by individuals with great credibility in the state.