

## Summary of Meeting Internal Discussion

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

**Friday, August 15, 2008**

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair; David Broden, Marianne Curry, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Sean Kershaw, Joe Mansky, John Mooty, Jim Olson (by phone), Wayne Popham, and Carolyn Ring

**A. Context of the meeting:** Leaders of the Civic Caucus gathered this morning for a three-hour planning session to review the history of the Civic Caucus, progress on the strategic plan and to look ahead to possible options for the future. We'll take the input from today's session and later propose any needed revisions in our strategic plan.

**B. Opening comments**--Verne Johnson, who has chaired the Civic Caucus throughout its history, and Paul Gilje, Civic Caucus coordinator, opened the discussion. During their comments the following points were raised:

**1. Informal history goes back to 1950**--While the current educational work (interviews, circulation of summaries, preparation of statements) of the Civic Caucus extends back about three years, Verne recalled that the Civic Caucus can trace its beginnings to a group of four individuals who began meeting weekly in 1950 to discuss public affairs. Of that group, Verne, Chuck Clay, and Jim Olson still are active in the Civic Caucus today.

Three years ago the Civic Caucus embarked on its current activity of offering education and involvement on public affairs to a wider audience. A core group was enlarged and an email list was assembled, starting with about 150 and growing to more than 1,000 today, including all state legislators, members of Congress from Minnesota, and other statewide office holders.

**2. Principles guiding Civic Caucus activity**--Verne highlighted a few principles that have been key to the development of the Civic Caucus:

**a. Concentrate on issues, not candidates**--The Civic Caucus strictly limits itself to a discussion of public affairs issues and never involves itself with political candidates.

**b. Be strictly non-partisan**--The Civic Caucus is recognized as a 501(c)3 organization under the Internal Revenue code and is strictly non-partisan in all its work. We concentrate on sharing wide varieties of opinions.

**c. Concentrate on Minnesota**--We work on state issues, not federal, although Verne acknowledged an earlier involvement for a period of time on issues relating to the Middle East.

**d. Offer people a new way to stay involved in public affairs**--The Civic Caucus doesn't require its large group of participants to attend meetings. Only a small group gets together face-to-face each week. The bulk of the organization is "virtual", staying in touch via the internet and email. Such an approach, Verne said, gives large numbers of people the opportunity to be active even if their own schedules or other limitations would preclude coming to meetings. Moreover, he said, while people of all ages and public affairs experience are active, we make a special effort to provide a

way for persons who have many years of involvement in community affairs and who still want to make a contribution.

**e. Conduct highly-focused educational sessions**--Verne emphasized the importance of how we conduct our weekly interviews with thought leaders. Speeches aren't given. Instead a few Civic Caucus members engage in give-and-take with thought leaders, staying focused on specific issues. Thus, Civic Caucus core members have a special responsibility to ask intelligent questions.

**f. Provide a permanent, on-line, accessible "library"**--The Civic Caucus maintains an extensive website, <http://civiccaucus.org>, thanks to our volunteer webmaster, Gary Clements. The website contains summaries of all interviews with thought leaders, now totaling more than 100 interviews. We invite all participants to respond to questions about the interviews, and all responses and comments are placed on the website. A special section of the website organizes the interviews by subject matter.

**g. Seek ways to strengthen public policy leadership in the state**--The Civic Caucus is working to help return Minnesota to its former role as a leading-edge state on development of innovative public policy. The base of participation needs to be broader at all levels, from initiating proposals, to endorsing and nominating candidates, all the way through to elections.

**3. Outlook for today**--Verne said today we want to have a good discussion about where the Civic Caucus should go in months and years ahead. The organization doesn't have the more obvious characteristics of a long term organization. The Civic Caucus has no office, no executive director, no stationery. Its address is the home of Verne Johnson, its volunteer chair. Its staffing is handled by Paul Gilje, a part-time consultant, whose home computer is the base for Civic Caucus emails. Our total spending never has exceeded \$35,000 in any 12-month period. We don't have membership dues. We've not sought funding beyond our core group. Within the core, three individuals have provided the bulk of the financial support.

One question, Verne said, is whether the Civic Caucus should be permanent. It has no succession plan, and its leaders are in their 70s and 80s. Some people suggest the organization should raise more money and hire staff, with the intent of becoming a permanent fixture. Others suggest that the Civic Caucus should be absorbed by another organization such as the Citizens League. It's also possible, he said, that the Civic Caucus would continue exactly as it is today. Even with that option, however, some kind of succession plan for leadership would be needed.

**4. Current level of interest and respect**--The Civic Caucus receives very little attention from the media. We hear many good comments from our active electronic participants, although most of the 1,000-plus participants simply receive our material without comment. We think that our work is beneficial for a large group, but we don't really know.

**5. Results of recent survey of participants reviewed**--We reviewed results of a recent survey of our participants on possible areas for Civic Caucus changes. A summary of those results:

6.3 average On a scale of (0) not at all desirable to (5) neutral to (10) very desirable, should the Civic Caucus expand its present level of activities?

On a scale of (0) not at all desirable to (5) neutral to (10) very desirable, please the importance of the following possible changes:

- \_\_\_ **6.2 average** \_\_\_ Add more details to strategic plan
- \_\_\_ **6.6 average** \_\_\_ Expand fund raising
- \_\_\_ **8.1 average** \_\_\_ Adopt a succession plan
- \_\_\_ **5.8 average** \_\_\_ Improve opportunities for feedback from participants
- \_\_\_ **7.4 average** \_\_\_ Devise better measures of identifying success
- \_\_\_ **8.0 average** \_\_\_ Add women to the core group
- \_\_\_ **7.3 average** \_\_\_ Establish a "brand" for the Civic Caucus
- \_\_\_ **6.6 average** \_\_\_ Increase the number of participants
- \_\_\_ **6.3 average** \_\_\_ Expand statewide
- \_\_\_ **6.6 average** \_\_\_ Hold occasional meetings where electronic participants may attend
- \_\_\_ **7.2 average** \_\_\_ Increase opportunities for participants to suggest topics
- \_\_\_ **5.2 average** \_\_\_ Allow participants share thoughts with one another on our website
- \_\_\_ **4.8 average** \_\_\_ Seek website endorsements from notable public figures

**C. General discussion**--During discussion the following points were raised:

**1. Give opportunities for participants to communicate directly with one another?**--While all comments are placed on our website, we don't offer an opportunity for bloggers to engage in direct give-and-take with one another. A Civic Caucus core member suggested we might explore such a possibility. That suggestion led to a brief discussion of how many people turn to our website now, and how many would turn to the website to read or offer comments. Now only about 200-250 different individuals turn to our website each month.

Our current approach for receiving comments, via direct email response seems to elicit on average, about 30 comments--totaling six or more pages of text--for every summary we distribute.

**2. Place interviews on video?**--We could open opportunities for many more people to see our interviews by using a camera and placing video on our website. People could then download the interviews to their own devices.

**3. A valuable service no one else is providing**--A Civic Caucus member reminded others that we are providing a unique service. No other organization conducts its information sessions as we do. No one else offers the information in such an easily accessible manner. No one else gives its participants such convenient access for involvement. It was suggested that we have a prototype that could serve as a national model for involvement.

**4. Need for a marketing plan**--We don't know as much about our audience as we need to know, a member said, suggesting a marketing plan be prepared. A marketing plan would help us in targeting our material, the member said. For example, in distributing our recommendations we might end up devoting more attention to reaching a select audience, rather than a mass media audience.

Components of a marketing plan:

- Defining our audience
- Surveying those being served
- Identifying other groups providing similar services
- Identifying areas for collaboration

Curry and Broden offered to put together an outline of a possible marketing plan.

**5. Make our weekly emails more appealing**--By employing some relatively simple procedures we could add color and highlights to our weekly distribution of summaries by email, perhaps with "summaries of the summaries", to help busy people.

**6. Invite participants to suggest questions of speakers**--Maybe we should specifically inquire of our 1,000 members what questions we might ask speakers. At a minimum we should be inviting our core members to suggest questions.

**7. Clarify the purpose of each topic under study**-- When we select an interview or a topic, we should make clear to our participants the need for the topic, what any recommendation might lead to, and who the audience is. This would go a long way to helping our participants grasp why we are doing a subject and how it will impact public policy and by whom.

**8. Process of education and involvement outlined**--Paul outlined the key steps we follow now in providing education and involvement for everyone, core members and electronic participants:

**a. Careful selection of persons to be interviewed**--We try to bring before us individuals with different views, to make it possible that we obtain a broad perspective on issues.

**b. Advance planning for meetings**--We give speakers a heads-up on the kinds of questions we anticipate will arise, to assist speakers in preparation, as well as to assist core members in their questioning.

**c. Conducting highly-focused meetings**--We engage in conversation with speakers, rather than listen to a speech. This gives us the opportunity to make sure that the speakers address priority issues.

**d. Insisting on accuracy**--We always submit a preliminary draft of summaries of our meetings to the speakers before the summaries are distributed, so that necessary corrections, additions and deletions can be made.

**e. Making summaries easily readable**--Although our summaries often are 4 to 6 pages in length, we provide bold-faced headlines for each paragraph to help people review contents in a minimum of time.

**f. Giving participants an easy way to respond**--We try to ask a couple of questions about each summary, with a simple ranking on a scale of strong disagreement to strong agreement, and we try to make it very easy for people to respond quickly or, as they wish, with more detail.

**g. Providing immediate feedback to participants**--Anyone responding will receive a personal acknowledgement, with our thanks, as quickly as possible, sometimes within minutes, usually within 24-48 hours.

**h. Assembling comments in a readable fashion**--We arrange all comments in a single document, with efforts to clean up simple errors in spelling and to place comments in a common format. We then place that document online, next to

each interview. One question is whether we should email the comments to everyone, but we are hesitant to send out too many emails to our participants.

**i. Seeking participant comments on preliminary drafts of statements**--Lately we've been issuing statements with recommendations approximately four times a year. The core produces a preliminary draft, which then is circulated to all participants, seeking their response. Participant responses are shared with all core members, are used in redrafting, and, ultimately are included online as part of the permanent record of our statements.

**j. Seeking participant signatures of support**--After the core has made changes in statements and approved them, we submit the statements to participants, asking for signatures of support, which are made a part of the statements.

**k. Polling participants from time to time**--In addition to our regular requests for comments on summaries and statements, we ask participants to evaluate various aspects of Civic Caucus work and procedures.

**9. Disappointing publicity on the Civic Caucus**--Members expressed disappointment with infrequent attention in the public media from Civic Caucus statements. One person suggested we might approach public access cable companies that always are looking for a show. We also might be more aggressive in approaching on-line news outlets.

**10. The approach is working**--One member said we should recognize that despite some shortcomings our approach is basically working quite well. We've got an established process; a good audience; we're non-partisan; we listen carefully to suggestions. There's nothing wrong with continuing to steer the course. Another member said that the Civic Caucus is helping provide a higher quality of public discourse than is otherwise possible today, particularly with changes in the traditional mass media.

**11. Recommendations helpful but not the most important part of our work**--Another member said that education and involvement is what is most important. Recommendations help. In fact, they are probably essential in retaining people's interest in a topic. But the big contribution we make is in helping ourselves and others to learn more about community issues.

**12. Possibility of separating governance and programmatic aspects of the organization**--One person suggested that perhaps the Civic Caucus core could be divided, with one group being responsible for governance of the organization and another for conducting the weekly meetings with speakers.

**13. Continue website development**--Our website has developed so far more as a library of Civic Caucus material than a place where large numbers of people are turning for information, although it could already serve that function. On an average month about 250 different persons turn to the website. Most people are able to find what they want, although the commentary by individuals on each interview summary is not that easy to find. One must first click on a specific interview and then click on "Participant responses...". We'd like to do a better job in that regard. Another shortcoming is our failure to have any kind of very brief description of the contents of a given summary. Also we haven't come to grips with whether we should give people the right to make comments directly on the website. We have a very competent webmaster in Gary Clements. Clements, retired Woodbury schools librarian, is devoting his time as a volunteer for the Civic Caucus, without compensation.

**14. Financial future of the Civic Caucus needs some work**--Currently, the Civic Caucus has enough funds to carry us through February 2009, Verne said. Another year's financing beyond that might be possible from those who have made significant contributions to date, he said. We've never solicited funds broadly and have no fees. It was suggested that perhaps we might consider seeking contributions from a broader group. Membership fees seem counterproductive--however a voluntary approach such as used effectively by MPR and by MinnPost offers a focus on "if you like what you see, help us continue the activity". Such an approach might be appropriate after a marketing plan is in place and other elements of the strategic plan are implemented.

**15. Important to stress Civic Caucus involvement in government structure**--It was noted that the Civic Caucus is playing a very significant role in keeping government structure, including the structure of the Legislature, high on its priority list. One member cautioned that we won't be turning the clock back and might be better advised to accept the Legislature structure as it exists today.

**16. Stay in business**--Verne said that while the outlines aren't clear about how the Civic Caucus might evolve, he senses that our discussion today indicates strong support for continuing the service provided by the Civic Caucus.

**17. Explore collaboration with others**--Members felt that we should explore working closely with other groups, such as MinnPost and the Citizens League, but for the time being we shouldn't spend a lot of time exploring merger or being absorbed by some other group.

**18. Look to foundations for more leadership**--Some members said they like the idea of challenging the community foundations to play a stronger role in stimulating a better flow of serious public policy information. Reference was made to our session a week ago with Ted Kolderie, who said that community foundations have an important role to play in stimulating analysis of issues of first order importance to the future of the Twin Cities metropolitan area and Minnesota.

**19. Continue to develop relationships with the Citizens League**--We reviewed the steps already taken with the Citizens League, including the encouragement of Citizens League representatives to be present at Civic Caucus meetings.

Sean Kershaw, executive director of the Citizens League, was present for a discussion of the Citizens League relationship.

Kershaw opened his remarks by discussing current financial pressures on the Citizens League. The current financial situation is a problem born of success, not failure. The Citizens League simply was growing too fast, and needs to raise additional unrestricted funds. The League has identified the issue, addressed the causes, and the Board and staff are hard at work raising money -- with initial success in the past few weeks. Long term, the Citizens League is in good shape, he said.

The financial pressures have stimulated the Citizens League to focus its activity on a few issues at a time and to examine ways that Citizens League members can be given better tools to work together in framing issues. The Citizens League is working to become more inter-generational, not to concentrate only on younger members, which has been high priority in recent years.

In response to a question, Kershaw said that taxes, health care and transportation will remain high on the Citizens League agenda. Water policy, a newly-undertaken study, will also be a priority issue, along with issues of poverty, possibly via the interaction of poverty and health care.

**20. Thanks to Kershaw**--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Sean for meeting with us today.

**D. Internal Civic Caucus business**

**1. Constitutional amendment statement**--We reviewed our latest communication from advocates for the amendment, who quarrel with our interpretation of state financial data about past growth in environmental appropriations. The statement was approved for circulation to participants for receiving signatures of support.

**2. Upcoming meetings**--Paul reviewed the upcoming meeting schedule:

Friday, August 22--Angie Eilers, Growth & Justice education expert

Friday, August 29--Craig Swaggert, chair, Independence Party of  
Minnesota

Friday, September 5--State Rep. Alice Hausman, St. Paul, developing a  
proposal on transportation structure

Friday, September 12--Joe Shuster, author of Fossil Fools

Friday, September 19--still open

Friday, September 26--State Rep. Mindy Greiling, co-chair P.S.  
Minnesota (educators group advocating on behalf of education)

Friday, October 3--Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association,  
president and executive director

Friday, October 10--still open

Friday, October 17--Peter Hutchinson, president, Bush Foundation