

Summary of Meeting on Civic Caucus strategic plan

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

<http://civiccaucus.org>

Friday, May 22, 2009

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Marianne Curry, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Jan Hively, Dan Loritz, Joe Mansky, John Mooty, and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting--Today's meeting is a review of where the Civic Caucus has been and a preliminary look at the future, as part of a process to update the Civic Caucus strategic plan.

B. During the meeting the following points were raised:

1. Preliminary summer schedule--The group began by reviewing a preliminary summer schedule prepared by Verne and Paul:

We're planning to hold internal discussion meetings on our strategic plan every other week, beginning Friday, June 12. On alternate weeks we'll continue to conduct our typical interviews with knowledgeable individuals on public affairs. We intend that some interviews will provide background for our internal discussion meetings. Tentatively, we're thinking about a schedule like this:

- * Friday, June 12--Key issues facing the state of Minnesota.
- * Friday, June 26--The media future
- * Friday, July 3--The Civic Caucus process, including its information/involvement aspects
- * Friday, July 17--Succession planning; financing the Civic Caucus; our relationship to the Citizens League and other community organizations
- * Friday, July 31--Communicating the story/message of the Civic Caucus in writing to audiences within and beyond Minnesota
- * Friday, August 14--Consider first draft of new strategic plan
- * Friday, August 28--Adopt strategic plan

2. Discussion of Minnesota's civic, political and governmental health--A working memo from Verne and Paul highlights that the state is losing its reputation as a state that demonstrates the best in representative democracy.

At the very moment of greatest urgency many public leaders appear oblivious to the problem or are paralyzed to do much about it. But our civic, political, and governmental systems are at risk of decay, threatening our quality of life. Indicators of decay:

- Inadequate leadership.
- Unrealistic expectations that government can solve all public problems.
- More influence of public officials representing extreme views on the political spectrum
- Greater influence of interest groups over the general public.
- Systems of endorsing and nominating candidates for public office that grant extraordinary advantage to some candidates over others.
- Voter cynicism about the political process.
- Excessive number and overlapping levels of local government.
- Uncertainty about whom to hold responsible
- Lack of creative ideas in addressing public issues.
- Subtle removal of elected officials' authority.

3. Concentrating on structure and process--During discussion the Civic Caucus emphasis on structure and process, a member suggested that perhaps we're using words that don't attract a great deal of interest. Instead maybe we should use the term "reform". Another member suggested there's a risk of over-reacting to current concerns about the state's leadership being in jeopardy. There's an ebb and flow in our leadership. This member noted that divisions between the executive and legislative branches might not be as strident in another few years.

4. Possible constitutional challenge of Governor's un-allotment actions--At this point the group wondered whether a constitutional challenge might be brought against the Governor's use of un-allotment to balance the budget.

A related outcome might be that the Legislature would propose a constitutional amendment to voters (an action that can occur without approval by the Governor) allowing the Legislature to call itself into session.

5. Growing trend toward more extremist positions and single-issue voting--A member suggested that the current structure for endorsement, nomination, and election doesn't seem to be fair to individuals at all points on the political spectrum. A

more favored position today seems to be on either extreme. Thus, consensus is more difficult to realize.

6. Developments since last strategic plan was adopted in November 2007--
Referring to the working memo prepared for the meeting, several developments since our last strategic plan was adopted were highlighted:

--Our process continues to work very well and, based on our surveys of participants, clearly valued by them. Key parts of the process:

- (a) identifying key issues,
- (b) selecting informed individuals to interview,
- (c) conducting sharply focused interviews with these individuals,
- (d) respecting the importance of circulating individuals' viewpoints accurately,
- (e) guaranteeing that a wide variety of viewpoints are covered,
- (f) preparing summaries of these interviews, organized for fast, focused reading,
- (g) making sure all interviewees can make corrections before summaries are circulated
- (h) circulating summaries via the internet only,
- (i) inviting responses to specific questions about the summaries,
- (j) assembling and distributing these responses for everyone's benefit, and
- (k) permanently placing these summaries on our website for ready access by anyone.

--In total more than 150 interviews have been conducted, almost one a week.

--Early in 2008 we significantly expanded our system of receiving input, by seeking responses to specific questions, in addition to inviting general comments. All responses are tabulated and reported on our website. We consistently receive six or more pages of comments each week.

--Since November 2007 we have issued several position papers: redistricting, judicial selection, constitutional amendments, and transportation, all dealing with structure and process. However, we've had very little publicity and impact because of these reports.

--We've almost doubled our number of participants, from 600 to more than 1,100.

--Our website was set up in January 2008, <http://civiccaucus.org>, and contains all interviews (organized by interviewee and by subject matter), all comments, tabulation of all questions, all position papers, and information about the Civic Caucus.

We've experienced steady growth website users, but we still average only about 300 different individuals turning to the website at least once a month.

--We've added several persons to the Civic Caucus core: David Broden, Jan Hively, Dan Loritz, Marina Lyon, Joe Mansky, and Tim McDonald. Marianne Curry was added, and still is active in our strategic planning, but job pressures have precluded her remaining an official member of the core.

--We've continued our close relationship with the Citizens League. Leaders of the two organizations meet periodically to discuss common interests. The executive director of the Citizens League is treated as a core participant, receiving all materials.

7. Remaining agenda items--We highlighted other areas where changes have yet to be made:

--Consider whether a special role might be developed for the most respected civic and governmental leaders in Minnesota, past and present.

--Raise additional funds.

--Consider a significant expansion of the Civic Caucus' ability to gather, organize and disseminate information.

--Broaden the understanding of the Civic Caucus as a prototype by inviting a foundation to take on a task of financing and writing a manual on the Civic Caucus thereby making details of our process accessible to any organization anywhere.

--Evaluate a succession plan for Civic Caucus leadership, including the question of whether the Civic Caucus should be absorbed by another organization or continue its independent existence.

8. Transportation report still timely--Our call for a comprehensive transportation budget, operating and capital, combining rail, bus, and roads, is still timely, it was noted. It is possible that such a proposal will be considered by the Legislature in 2010. As a non-profit, 501(c)3 organization, the Civic Caucus doesn't engage in lobbying, so much follow-up would need to be carried out by others.

It would help a great deal, a member said, if recognized veteran political and governmental leaders from both major parties would take leadership on implementation, a member suggested. Another member noted that many such individuals signed on in support of our transport report.

9. Whether the Civic Caucus process might serve as a model for others--The Civic Caucus is undertaking several steps that aren't widely used by others and might be most beneficial, a member suggested. For example, participants don't need to

attend meetings, other than those few who conduct our interviews. We invite a wide assortment of points of view. We encourage readership by inviting participants to respond to questions each week and by summary headlines at the beginning of a set of paragraphs. We circulate responses widely. When we take positions, we invite suggestions from participants and, ultimately, invite them to sign on in support. All business is conducted by email, and all materials are placed on our website.

10. Relating the work of the Civic Caucus to an improved communications environment in Minnesota--The group discussed first the uncertain future faced by traditional news media, a topic that the Civic Caucus probably will address in future meetings. A member noted that today's StarTribune contains an article on possible changes in law and regulation that might be necessary for major newspapers to survive.

The group went on to discuss a small, but possibly pioneering, role that the Civic Caucus itself is playing in a vastly larger environment of gathering, organizing, distributing and responding to public affairs information. The Civic Caucus makes not attempt to cover news. Very selectively the Caucus promotes intelligent interchange of ideas in the structures and process of state and local government. With our own limitations of time and resources we are able to deal with only a very few select issues. And we are able to distribute our information only to a small segment of the potential public affairs audience in the state. It was suggested that perhaps some organization might see an opportunity to apply the Civic Caucus approach across a whole spectrum of issues to a vastly larger audience. The Civic Caucus conceivably could be melded into such an effort.

11. Possible input from the Citizens League--As the Civic Caucus looks at its strategic plan this summer, it would be very helpful, members suggested, if we could invite Sean Kershaw of the Citizens League to meet with us.

C. Discussion of other matters--The group briefly discussed several other matters:

1. Approval of bill for new schools within school districts--Members noted that the Legislature approved, and the Governor signed, a bill that allows school districts to establish their own charter-type schools, if approved by the School Board and teachers. This little-noticed law could have far reaching implications for stimulating innovation that would occur within the framework of existing school districts.

2. New candidates for the Civic Caucus Board of Directors--The Civic Caucus functions mainly informally through its weekly meetings of what is known as the "Civic Caucus core". To fulfill technical legal requirements, the Civic Caucus has an official five-person Board of Directors for conducting business as legally required. The Board meets very infrequently and only for a short time. The Board has included Verne Johnson, chair; Charles Clay (now deceased) Jim Hetland, John Mooty, and Jim Olson.

Verne said that Jim Olson is retiring from the Board, although he will remain a member of the Civic Caucus core.

Janis Clay is being proposed to replace Charles Clay, and serve as secretary-treasurer of the board. Dan Loritz is being proposed to replace Jim Olson. Other board members are proposed for re-election.

The Civic Caucus Board will hold its annual business meeting on Friday, June 12, immediately preceding or following the regular meeting of the Civic Caucus core.