

Summary of Meeting with Alice Hausman

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437
Thursday, December 6, 2007

Present (all by phone): Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Wayne Popham

Guest speaker: State Representative Alice Hausman

A. Welcome and introduction-- Verne and Paul introduced State Representative Alice Hausman, St. Paul, chair of Capital Investment, Finance Committee. Hausman, first elected in 1989, is serving her 10th term. She has bachelor's and master's degrees in education. She has received several awards from arts and environmental organizations.

B. Comments and discussion-- In Hausman's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Emphasis on issues, not personalities-- Hausman said she appreciates the Civic Caucus emphasis on issues. She is a DFLer but believes we all have an obligation to work across the aisle. She gave as examples her relationship with the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce on the central Corridor and with Norm Coleman when he was mayor of St.. Paul.

Hausman recalled when Republican Phil Krinke was chair of the House Capital Investment Committee and she was the ranking minority member. The Democrats on the committee believed their role was to help put together the best bill possible, rather than to put up roadblocks or engage in partisan rancor, particularly over matters that were hot buttons for Rep. Krinke. The bill passed the House floor with resounding bipartisan support.

2. A real learning experience in 2007--This past year's passage of the bonding bill in the House, with Hausman as chair of the Capital Investment Committee, was a real learning experience for her. Though she believed the committee had worked in a bipartisan manner, when the bill reached the floor all Republicans except the one member who would be on the conference committee voted "no". Her understanding was that the Governor met with members of the minority party, urging the "no" vote. In the Senate the same request was made, but there were a few more minority Senators who resisted the request to vote no. For most, it became a partisan vote rather than a vote to reflect what might have been important to their constituents in the bill.

Hausman then reflected on what she believes has become a problem in terms of achieving good outcomes in the Legislature. What has begun to occur with more frequency is that legislative movement stalls while the three leaders--the Governor, the Senate majority leader and the Speaker of the House--negotiate in private. When there is no agreement, bills sit on the desk. She believes the Governor is intervening too early in the process. Each House should do its work, meet in Conference Committee when necessary and only then does the bill go to the Governor. He can sign or veto.

Such a process keeps faith with the people who elected their Senators and Representatives. A change in attitudes is needed, not a structural change, she said.

Yielding to three top leaders has occurred gradually over time, Hausman said. For example, she said, a few sessions ago the House, Senate and Governor reached agreement on a budgeting bill by allowing each to settle one-third of the then-existing differences over the budget.

Hausman said she is determined that the members of the House not yield decision-making in 2008.

3. Leadership by the 20-20 group?--A Civic Caucus member recalled that a group of Republican and DFL legislators formed a group that was supposed to produce a more issue-oriented, consensus-producing, environment to the Legislature. Hausman said the 20-20 group is largely invisible. Several of their members play very partisan roles on the floor.

4. Special interest groups and precinct caucuses--The group moved on to discuss whether precinct caucuses are threatened by the influence of special interest groups. Hausman said the question of what to do about precinct caucuses isn't an issue she has looked at in detail. Ultimately, Hausman said, grass roots response from an educated electorate is the way one reduces the influence of special interests.

A member wondered why political parties discourage people from running against endorsed candidates, when precinct caucuses, the beginning step in the endorsement process, seem to be controlled more by special interests than by the rank-and-file of the parties.

5. Changing the date of the primary election?--Hausman said election law is not one of her areas of emphasis. She said waiting until September for the general election campaign seems late, but many people like shorter campaigns.

6. Question of a full-time Legislature--A Civic Caucus member asked whether legislative partisanship would be lessened if members served part-time. Hausman replied that her Capital Investment Committee spends a great deal of time in the interim traveling around the state and learning more about needs. That is an important function that takes time, she said. Also, she doesn't like the idea of arbitrary cutoffs for when Legislature can meet. Such requirements don't apply to county boards or city councils, she said.

7. Structure for transportation planning and decision-making--Hausman said the transportation decision-making structure is broken. She cited transit planning as an example, with different jurisdictions for the metro area, some suburbs, and the rural area. She said she'd get a copy for the Civic Caucus of a paper by Aaron Isaacs on transit structure. She expressed concern about placing all responsibility at the state level because of other recent problems with the Department of Transportation. She mentioned the difficulty of creating a single fund for transportation because of constitutional restrictions.

8. Question of dedicating funds for the environment and the arts in the constitution--Hausman said she generally prefers that there not be dedicated funds but,

in the case of environment and the arts, the Legislature has not met the needs. Thus she supports a proposed constitutional amendment. A member commented that it seems odd that the Legislature also would consider turning over some of its responsibility for appropriations by giving outdoors enthusiasts an official role in recommending how the money would be spent.

9. Concern over legislative redistricting--While not endorsing the concept that the Legislature ought to draw its own district boundaries, Hausman is cautious about changing the current system because she doesn't know who would have the job if it weren't the Legislature. She mentioned that a commission was set up to deal with legislative pay raises, but that system isn't working. Though the commission has recommended salary increases, the Legislature is still unwilling to enact the suggested legislative raise.

10. Favorable towards Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)--Hausman is sympathetic with the IRV because it provides a way to assure that the winner is actually elected by a majority of the votes.

11. Concern over where the state is going--Hausman said she is concerned about the future of the state's economy. The state used to be above average in job growth. Now we're adding about 12,000 jobs a year. Even if we were just average, we'd be adding about 30,000 jobs a year, she said.

12. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne and Paul thanked Hausman for meeting with us today.