

Summary of Meeting with State Sen. Sheila Kiscaden

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55447

Thursday, December 7, 2006

Guest speaker: State Sen. Sheila Kiscaden, Rochester, MN

Present: Verne Johnson, chair, and Paul Gilje

A. Context of the meeting: The Civic Caucus is reviewing issues related to elections and impact on polarization and paralysis in the Legislature. Today's meeting was an informal meeting over breakfast between retiring State Sen. Sheila Kiscaden and Verne Johnson and Paul Gilje. During the meeting at a Perkins Restaurant in Minneapolis, former Governor Al Quie dropped by for a few minutes.

B. Comments by Kiscaden and discussion with the Civic Caucus

1. Power of the legislative caucuses is very large in legislative campaigns-- Kiscaden, who originally caucused as a Republican and in later years as a Democrat, observed that the most potent political force for legislative campaigns has shifted from candidates themselves or political parties to the legislative caucuses.

NOTE: Legislative caucuses must be distinguished from other terms in which the word "caucus" is used. Legislative caucuses are the organizations of the majority and the minority in the Minnesota House and Senate. Legislative caucuses are the political bodies with which the members of the House and Senate are affiliated--the House DFL Caucus, the Senate DFL Caucus, the House GOP Caucus, and the Senate GOP Caucus.

Legislative caucuses traditionally have served as the groups that organize the House and Senate when in session. But in recent years--helped by campaign finance laws--legislative caucuses have become dominant organizations for legislative campaigns, starting with recruitment of candidates, guiding or assisting candidates develop their campaign plans, providing technical assistance for targeted races, and providing campaign field staff, Kiscaden said.

2. Experience in the Rochester, MN area--Kiscaden described four close campaigns in the Rochester area: Senate District 30: Ann Lynch (D), 52 percent, and Scott Wright (R), 47 percent; House District 29b: Kim Norton (D), 50.2 percent, and Rich Decker (R), 49.6 percent; House District 30a: Tina Liebling (D), 52 percent, and Carla Nelson (R), 47 percent; and House District 30b: Andy Welti (D), 52 percent, and Bill Kuisle (R), 48 percent.

The Republican and Democratic legislative caucuses each hired and sent field staff to the Rochester area to work directly on those campaigns. Reportedly there were six field staff for Republican candidates and six for Democratic candidates working in the

Rochester area during the 2006 campaign season. Kiscaden, who wasn't a candidate for re-election to her Senate seat (District 30), said that the presence of field staff changes the dynamics of the campaigns on the local level. For example, need for candidates to directly enlist and manage volunteers in the Rochester area diminishes. Field staff are often recruited by, trained by, and consult with the political caucuses. Technical assistance and consultation is made available by the caucuses to the candidates on the development of their strategies and campaign materials.

There are both partisan and non-partisan staff at the Legislature. Some non-partisan staff, such as House and Senate research, work for all members of the House or Senate. In addition, every legislator is provided with personal staff support for their offices. These staff are hired by the caucuses. The House tends to provide one legislative assistant for every three legislators. The Senate provides one assistant for each Senator. There is also caucus specific staff. Each caucus directly hires some partisan staff who work for all members of that caucus. The partisan caucus staff tends to be clustered in the areas of issues research, communications, and constituent services.

Neither partisan or non-partisan staff who work for the Legislature are allowed to be involved in campaigns during their work time, nor are legislators allowed to do campaign work at the Capitol. However, it is practically the norm for all partisan staff to work on campaigns. Some caucuses expect all staff to "volunteer" time on weekends and use some vacation time to help with campaigns.

Some legislative caucus staff take extensive leaves during election years to work on campaigns. A few have even developed small businesses that specialize in developing and providing campaign materials.

Caucus leaders determine which candidates' campaigns will get the benefit of caucus resources. Not all candidates get such direct caucus support. Each year there are 'targeted' races that get the majority of the support. For example, Rochester had several targeted races this year.

3. Changes in campaign strategies: Kiscaden also observed that the nature of campaigns has also changed as a result of applying targeted marketing techniques. Rather than sending campaign materials to all voters, sophisticated mailing and door knocking techniques were adopted based on information known about that voter.

Candidates were encouraged to door-knock, of course. But they were often serving essentially as demographic data-gatherers, learning about the residents so that information could be used in targeted mailings and get-out-the-vote efforts.

Candidates' brochures aren't distributed to all homes in a legislative district. Instead they are targeted very carefully to specific population groups in the district, based on their political leanings and positions on key issues. Thus, a candidate's

positions on all issues never were distributed to all voters in the district. That is considered a waste of money.

In addition, most campaign pieces are honed down to very little text: bullet points and broad statements with lots of pictures. It was very hard to find information on candidates' overall positions, even when you checked their web sites, which also were maintained by the legislative caucuses. Keeping information on candidates' positions to a minimum is, in part, a defensive strategy. It leaves the candidate less vulnerable to attack.

Candidates today, especially in close or targeted races, are often the subject of attacks. With some frequency, these attacks are not done with the knowledge or consent of the candidate. In addition to attacks by special interest groups, often the legislative caucuses are the sources of these attacks, which are financed as an independent expenditure without the knowledge or consent of the candidate.

In targeted races, brochures attacking an opponent were sometimes prepared independently by the legislative caucuses. Often these brochures were prepared by the same firms that prepared the brochures that were developed, circulated and paid for by the candidate's own campaign. When the attack brochures looked as if they came from the candidate's campaign, an incorrect impression was created that it was the candidate distributing the attack brochures.

Each of the caucuses raises money that it uses for independent expenditures, field staff and other campaign related expenses.

In summary, what is happening more and more is that legislative campaigns are impacted by the caucuses—which recruit and enlist candidates, raise money, and have an active role in providing advice, strategy and resources for campaigns.

Legislators elected with major support by their caucuses enter the Legislature with significant commitments to support their caucus leaders, thereby diminishing the ability of individual legislators to act independently. Legislators who had faced strong efforts and opposition from the leaders of the other caucus during the campaign can find it difficult to put the antagonism and competitive nature of the campaign behind and move from partisanship to engaging in civil, respectful and non-partisan legislative debate. Similarly, caucus leaders sometimes continue to focus more on politics than policy. Particularly in the House, minority party members are often denied opportunities to serve on the committees that they prefer; they seldom are allowed to attend conferences and often have difficulty getting their proposed legislation heard in committee.

4. Large sums of money being spent—it has been reported that the Senate Democratic Caucus raised (and presumably spent) about \$2 million this campaign cycle. To illustrate the dollars spent on closely contested races, Kiscaden was told that \$300,000 (from all sources) was spent on the District 13 Senate race between Joe

Gimse (R), 51 percent, and Dean Johnson (D), 49 percent.

5. Support for limiting amounts legislative caucuses can receive--Kiscaden supports the recommendations made by David Schultz of Hamline that strict limits be placed on the amounts that legislative caucuses can spend on individual legislative races. Schultz advocated a \$2,000 limit on legislative caucus contributions to individual races and a \$500 limit on the amount that any contributor can make to a legislative caucus. Kiscaden thinks these limits need to be raised, but agrees with the principle of applying campaign limits that are required of candidates to the legislative caucuses and to other political action committees.

6. Change not likely within the Legislature--Because individual legislators have benefited from the ability of the current system, it is extremely doubtful that very many legislators would support changes to reduce the influence of the caucuses, she said. Strong public pressure will be required for change, she said.

7. Other possible changes--Kiscaden supports an earlier primary date. She said that candidates who receive a certain percentage of votes for party endorsement--not just the party winner--should be able to be placed on the ballot. She likes instant runoff voting, but believes it has little chance.

C. Comments by Al Quie--During the meeting former Governor Al Quie dropped by the table where Kiscaden was meeting with the Civic Caucus. Quie said that he believes one simple change in campaign finance would be to require that all funding for a given campaign must be raised only within the boundaries of the area where the race is occurring. Thus, for example, in a legislative race, all the money would need to come from within the affected legislative district.