

## Summary of Meeting with George Latimer

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, March 24, 2006

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty (by phone), Jim Olson (by phone), Clarence Shallbetter

**A. Introduction of George Latimer**--Verne introduced George Latimer, Professor of Urban Studies, Macalester College, one of the country's leading authorities on urban issues. Latimer has a special interest in public-private partnerships that encourage growth and development of affordable housing. Before coming to Macalester, Latimer served as Mayor of Saint Paul from 1976 to 1990, was Dean of Hamline University Law School, and was an advisor to Secretary Henry Cisneros at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Latimer received his B.A. from St. Michael's College and the L.L.B. from Columbia University Law School. Latimer received the Distinguished Humanitarian Service Award from the Ramsey County Bar Association on May 17, 2005. He has held leadership positions with the Citizens League.

**B. Comments and discussion with Latimer**--During Latimer's comments and discussion the following points were made:

**1. Agreement on problems of polarization and paralysis**--Latimer said he has read many of the materials distributed by the Civic Caucus and, while he doesn't consider himself an expert on electoral fixes, he is in basic agreement with where we are today, with a lack of comity and persistent extremism. It's hard for a sensible, independent-minded person to be comfortable in either party, he said.

**2. Need to change redistricting**--There's no question, he said, that elected officials who are affected by redistricting should not be the ones setting the boundaries in the first place. He said he would trust a cross-section of judges. Latimer, a Democrat, is impressed by the quality of federal judges in Minnesota, including those appointed by Republican presidents.

**3. "Appalling collapse" of the media in public affairs**--He's deeply concerned over the future of newspaper coverage in St. Paul, with the uncertainty of the future of the *Pioneer Press*. He said that on TV it's almost impossible for an elected official's message to be heard directly by the public. Instead the commentator is providing a voice-over the film or picture of the public official. There's been an "appalling collapse" of the media, he said.

The *Star Tribune* has had many more financial resources than the *Pioneer Press*. He's concerned that the *Pioneer Press* hasn't focused on hard news and that its views reflect mostly the business community. On the other hand he heard an exchange of views on MPR the other day in which John Finnegan, former *Pioneer Press* editor, was highlighting the fact that the *Pioneer Press* has a good record of coverage of the State Capitol.

**4. "Them" versus "us"**--The "cableization" of the media has helped balkanize the community and its underlying sense of connectiveness. Now, he said, people think of "them" versus "us". They don't feel

connected with one another. Latimer recalled that years ago everyone listened to Jack Benny on Sunday nights.

**5. Nature of student body at Macalester**--The students are very idealistic and committed change and helping people, he said. But they are more hands-on, one-on-one, emphasizing direct assistance. They are skeptical of a public-governmental programmatic response. They are respectful of each other and the rest of the class to a point of political correctness. They also are far to the left in electoral behavior.

**6. Change precinct caucus-primary system**--He agrees with others who believe the precinct caucus system needs change, as well as the date of the primary. But he also isn't anxious to see a longer campaign. He likes the idea of a party providing multiple endorsements of candidates. Perhaps candidates who subscribe to a set of principles would receive party endorsement. In discussion it was noted that the Sabo retirement in the 5th Congressional district is producing some interesting tests for endorsement-primary system. In this case the retirement was announced after the precinct caucuses, so the selection at the convention will be made by delegates selected without reference to any candidate in the 5th.

**7. Advantages of "diverse" districts**--Latimer remembered the legislative district for the late Sen. Nick Coleman. It included a variety of socio-economic areas, including West 7th, Crocus Hill and Summit-University. A legislator from such a district will promote connectedness, not balkanization. Thus, in the interests of reducing polarization in the Legislature whether district boundaries should be drawn more to include a variety of socio-economic groups than to be politically competitive.

**8. Constitutional amendments versus legislative action**--Verne noted that the Minnesota Legislature is considering proposals that would provide constitutional guarantees for certain functions to receive sales tax revenues. Latimer said that he hasn't taken a position yet on the constitutional amendment for transportation but that he's a "purist" and a believer in the representative form of government, not government by initiative and referendum. Verne wondered whether the Civic Caucus should hold a number of educational meetings this summer on the question of what belongs in the constitution.

**9. Importance of issues like immigration and early childhood education**--Latimer repeated what he had said earlier that he's much more interested in substantive issues than structural questions. On the matter of immigration he's a liberal but he's also for law and order. An illegal immigrant isn't legal.

On the matter of early childhood education, Latimer said Don Fraser, Nancy Latimer (George's wife) and others have demonstrated hands down the benefits of early childhood education.

Clarence noted the connection between the transportation amendment and providing funds for early childhood education. The transportation amendment removes \$600 million a year from the general fund and constitutionally dedicates the funds to transportation. Clarence is puzzled why child care advocates and other supporters of education and health and welfare aren't more concerned about the implications of the transportation amendment. Latimer said he hates dedicated funds. They demonstrate a lack of confidence in our ability to govern ourselves.

In the continuing discussion on early childhood education, Latimer said he doesn't want whatever funds are made available for early childhood to disappear in the existing k-12 educational bureaucracy. He noted that the McKnight Foundation, through Nancy Latimer, has established seven or eight centers in St. Paul to help four-year-olds learn to read. Some kind of hybrid system is needed, not just the "cookie-cutter" school system, he said.

In terms of educational priorities in light of limited finances, the discussion turned to whether more investment is needed in early childhood than on high school education, accepting the fact that such a step might appear to "write off" needs of older children. Latimer restated his feeling that early childhood needs to take precedence.

**10. Educational function of the Civic Caucus--**Verne asked about the usefulness of the educational function provided by the Civic Caucus. We have about 160 electronic participants who, over the last six months, have received summaries of some 25 meetings we've had with thought leaders on issues of America's democracy. Latimer said he is very much encouraged by the involvement of older persons with vast experience in the Civic Caucus. He'd expand that concept. Too many older people are concerned about their prescriptions and little more. However, the contribution that such an effort is making to better public policy decisions is open to question, he said. Latimer wondered whether some integration with the Citizens League might be worthwhile.

Paul noted that we in the Civic Caucus are wondering about the usefulness of a process where we simply provide information, without recommendations. Some of us believe that it is essential to make recommendations. Latimer said he is dubious whether we would have impact on our recommendations. However, he feels that it would be useful for the Civic Caucus to see if it could write a series of opinion articles for the *Star Tribune*. Such articles would establish the Caucus' visibility.

Whatever approach is taken on communication, Latimer said the most important factor is what is said, as against where it is said. If the Civic Caucus has something to say, and expresses its thoughts in a thorough, well-reasoned fashion, that is the best contribution it can make.

**11. Possibility of a Leadership Council--**Verne said the Civic Caucus is evaluating whether a special group of thought leaders might be set up to provide informal counsel to the Civic Caucus and also be ready to comment when the Legislature's polarization leads to paralysis.. Latimer said we shouldn't under-emphasize the contribution that the members of the Caucus itself, with their own experience, can make.

**C. Thanks--**Verne thanked Latimer for meeting with us.