



# Paul Gilje, Civic Caucus Executive Director

Minnesota needs more high quality, innovative public policy proposals

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

*June 17, 2016*

## Present

John Adams, Steve Alderson, Steve Anderson, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Dan Loritz (chair), Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Audrey Clay, Janis Clay, Randy Johnson, Abdullah Kiatamba, Tim McDonald.

## Summary

Innovative changes occur after specific, actionable proposals are advanced, according to Civic Caucus Executive Director Paul Gilje. Coming up with those proposals is where a good amount of the problem lies today, he says.

Gilje speaks to the Civic Caucus interview group as the Caucus begins work on a report with findings, conclusions and recommendations, based on its review over the past 10 months of the public-policy process in Minnesota. He encourages the group to concentrate during the following week's internal discussion on how to get more high-quality public-policy proposals initiated in the state—that is, how to make Minnesota a hothouse for innovative ideas. He outlines what makes a good proposal, what environment makes it more likely that good proposals will be advanced and what enhances prospects that good proposals will be debated and, hopefully, enacted.

Gilje urges the Civic Caucus to be bold and courageous as it writes its report, which it plans to issue publicly by Dec. 1, 2016. He says the Caucus has nothing to lose, so it doesn't have to compromise in the report, which will be a contribution to the community.

Gilje agrees with several members of the interview group that perhaps the report should focus on how the community can improve the proposals it advances to the Legislature. Several interviewers want the report also to address ways to improve the legislative process so the Legislature will be more receptive to good ideas from outside groups and organizations.

## Biography

Paul Gilje is executive director of the Civic Caucus. He arranges Civic Caucus speakers and meetings, prepares Civic Caucus reports and maintains the Civic Caucus e-mail list of 5,000 people. He served as executive director of the Presbyterian Homes Foundation from 2000 to 2005. From 1993 to 2000 he was a church fundraiser. From 1988 to 1993 he was director of stewardship and administrator for Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Minn.

Gilje served as research director and later associate director of the Citizens League from 1964 to 1988. He was a staff writer for the *Minneapolis Star* from 1960 to 1964. He has bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

## Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus interviewed Paul Gilje, executive director of the Civic Caucus, in preparation for an internal discussion to be held on Friday, June 24. That discussion among the Civic Caucus interview group is intended to raise the highest priority areas for the Caucus to cover in its upcoming report reviewing how the public-policy process is working in Minnesota-now, in the past and into the future.

## Discussion

**In its 11-year history, the Civic Caucus has interviewed approximately 45 different people each year on public issues important to Minnesotans.** The Caucus has interviewed business leaders, elected officials, nonelected government officials, academic experts, journalists, representatives of nonprofits, and others on a variety of issues. According to Paul Gilje of the Civic Caucus, the Caucus is committed to telling as many people as possible what took place during an interview. "Our whole idea is to share," he said. The Caucus sends out written summary notes of all its meetings to a large list of e-mail readers, now numbering 5,000 people.

**For the past 10 months, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the public-policy process in Minnesota and plans to issue a report.** While that review will continue for the next month or two, Gilje said, the Caucus plans to publicly issue a report on what it has learned during that review by Dec. 1, 2016. That means coming up with the first draft by Sept. 1, 2016, and a complete report with approval by the Civic Caucus board by Oct. 31, 2016. The report will include findings, conclusions and recommendations on how well the public-policy process in Minnesota has worked in the past, how well it is working now and how it might work better looking to the future.

**The Civic Caucus should be bold and courageous.** Gilje reminded the interview group that in writing its report, "the Caucus has nothing to lose, so we don't have to compromise. We're making a contribution to the community, rather than to ourselves. We aren't representing any special interest, but we're thinking we're representing the community as best as we can. We're concentrating on accomplishing our objectives by helping others achieve theirs."

**We should emphasize the health of Minnesota .** "It's a great place to live," Gilje said. "Minnesota ranks high on just about any measure." Of course, he said, there are some comparisons that reflect negatively on the state.

**Minnesota's approaches to public policy are healthy.** Gilje said those approaches are a great asset for the state and reflect the depth of interest, commitment, optimism, confidence and urgency of people and organizations here. He noted leadership from state agencies, the governor and the Legislature, as well as from organizations like Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), the *Star Tribune*, the *Pioneer Press*, the Saint Paul Foundation, the Minneapolis Foundation, the Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota, similar schools at other academic institutions, political parties, the Itasca Project, the Minnesota Business Partnership, the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, GREATER MSP, Growth & Justice, Center of the American Experiment, the Citizens League and more. There are also strongly organized groups for one interest or another and many locally based groups.

**There is a widely acknowledged list of challenges facing the state, including the following:**

- Sort out nongovernmental and governmental roles in economic development.
- Match jobs available to qualified jobseekers.
- Attack causes of poverty-level incomes.
- Prepare young children for school.
- Remove educational achievement gaps among various groups.
- Increase the proportion of youth graduating from high school.
- Make college more relevant and affordable.
- Link colleges and universities with employers and the communities.
- Integrate immigrants into the state's social and economic life.
- Improve the process of identifying, endorsing, nominating and selecting the state's elected and appointed officials.
- Attract new residents and discourage exodus.
- Provide workers the means to efficiently get from home to work and back.
- Improve outcomes in mental health treatment and prisoner rehabilitation.
- Protect the state's natural resources.
- Adjust to climate change.
- Examine the effect and limitations of movements of tax dollars among different levels of government.

**There is no shortage of efforts to ameliorate these problems.** " Ideas are coming from many different directions," Gilje said, "and not always from where we usually think."

**Both nongovernmental and governmental actions are inevitably involved, but it's a mistake to think that governmental actions are always central.** Nor are organizations, whether

nongovernmental or governmental, always central, Gilje said. Government might think it's central. When ideas are the product, who's the buyer and who's the seller?

- Ultimately, what controls is what people do. For example, the Civil Rights demonstrations occurred before political change. Young people are living together before marriage. They just did it. Society accepted it. And business has been heavily involved with early learning through scholarship funding.
- Innovation today in helping people get from one place to another originated not in the governmental transportation agencies but in the creative action of individuals and companies like Uber.

"There are ideas coming from so many directions," Gilje said.

**In the arena where governmental organizations in particular are involved, accomplishing public policy change is proving to be extremely difficult.**

Gilje noted the following reasons that have been offered for this:

- We're looking to the wrong level of government. We shouldn't look to Washington for every decision that has to be made. We need to look first within the state.
- Problems aren't easily solved; patience is required.
- The polarization at the Legislature makes progress difficult. But it's hard to place all the blame on legislators if others don't bother to offer creative solutions to the impasse.
- It's hard to achieve consensus among people of different ages, ethnicity, income and other backgrounds. It's easy to blame the "who," not the "what." Maybe we need to give more help to each other's initiatives.
- Innovative changes never occur unless someone first comes up with the *specific, innovative proposal*/for the changes. That's where a good amount of the problem lies today.

**The state should be a hothouse for innovative ideas.** Gilje would like the Caucus interview group to focus on the need for specific, innovative proposals for change during the upcoming internal discussion on June 24. "Let's come up with conclusions and recommendations about making this community a real hothouse of new ideas," Gilje said. "That's something this state urgently needs. And everybody needs to work at that. It's not just up to the Civic Caucus to do that."

**Who understands the policy cycle?** Gilje outlined the policy-cycle concept developed by Ted Kolderie, a member of the Caucus interview group:

**Events yield...**

**Data and information, which lead to...**

**Identification of issues, which then involve...**

**Shaping the issues and...**

**Analyzing them, which produce...**

**Actionable proposals, that lead to...**

**Resolution of the issues, which, in turn, produces...**

**Events.**

**Then the cycle begins all over again.**

Gilje then asked the following questions:

- Is the policy cycle widely acknowledged, known and understood?
- How important is the cycle?
- Who is tracking its overall health in Minnesota?
- Are there gaps in the cycle?
- Do we need to broaden the traditional concept of who is involved in resolving issues?

**What makes a good proposal?** Gilje asserted that the following are aspects of good proposals:

1. People need to recognize that it's much better to be bold upfront. Don't worry about being perfect. The proposal is the first word, not the last word. The proposal, in most cases, is not the way it's going to be ultimately decided. Imperfect proposals produce better proposals.
2. The proposal needs to be sufficiently specific to be actionable. It can't just be a vague expression of the desire for change.
3. The problem needs to be thoroughly analyzed and factually based. It's not enough to fall back on a cliché, e.g., "promote equity." What is actually going to occur?
4. It seems that people designing proposals shut their doors rather than open them. It's vital to share as broadly as possible what you know and what you don't know. Get rid of the pride and the fear. People respect you for that.
5. Often, people concentrate on symptoms, rather than underlying causes. Doing the analysis to really think about that is key.
6. Wherever it's possible, establish incentives that encourage people acting in their own self-interest will simultaneously advance the public interest.
7. People must propose real innovation, not just urge people to do the same things better.
8. Proposals should change the architecture of our social systems as deemed needed.
9. Proposals should turn less to central control and more to mutual accommodation.

**What environment makes it more likely that good proposals will be advanced?** Gilje stressed the following factors:

1. The proposals should be independently initiated, on behalf of the general public, not on behalf of any advocacy group.
2. A nonpartisan atmosphere.
3. A proposal should be openly prepared, with widely circulated information.
4. Professionals should be involved, but the process should be controlled by citizens.
5. Someone in the community should assemble a comprehensive list of top problems and organizations can then select priority problems to work on.
6. Organizations and groups undertaking studies of problems must provide broader communication with those who are outsiders to the process, deliberately seeking their input and sharing information widely.
7. The study and proposals must be prepared in a civil atmosphere, with no effort to have winners and losers.
8. Someone should be evaluating the proposals. What's the equivalent in public policy to a sportswriter's analysis of team performance or a music critic's review of an orchestra concert?

**What enhances prospects that good proposals will be debated and, preferably, enacted?** Gilje listed the following:

- It's important to seek endorsement by others, so a proposal is not just some lone wolf's idea. Likewise, it's very important to endorse other efforts.
- Proposals must be widely circulated and understood.
- There must be dependable financing for the proposing entities.
- It's vital to listen to others.
- Individuals and groups must not care who gets the credit. Extend credit as broadly as possible. There's no limit to what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.

**What does this mean for the various types of groups involved in public policy?**

Gilje stressed the following:

- Academic institutions: It's important for them to document the relative proportion of their research on state and local as against national and international.
- Foundations: They should look at their relative emphasis on direct service to individuals versus investigating major system change.
- Media of all types: They need help in reporting on public policy and on proposals for change.
- Political parties: They must not only find the candidates, but also educate them on public issues.
- Civic groups: They must commit to widespread sharing of information and to attempting to accomplish their own objectives by helping others.

**The Civic Caucus interview group should be prepared to concentrate during the June 24 internal discussion on how to get high-quality public-policy proposals initiated in Minnesota.**

Gilje said our assumption is that the community could do better: Issues are not getting developed and good proposals are not being offered. One thing the Caucus can do is to stimulate people to do a better job. "It's so easy to leave it hanging," Gilje said. "Who's going to take action? We need to concentrate on *how* it can happen."

**The meeting was opened to questions and comments, including the following:**

**If we are going to say we need better proposals for change than the community is generating today, we must demonstrate how we're falling short.** An interviewer said we must do this if we want to have standing with various groups. "Otherwise, it's just an allegation," he said.

**The state Legislature is a closed system and is getting more and more closed, except to all the special interest advocacies.** An interviewer asserted that if we look back at the interviews, there are lots of places where good ideas are not being considered. "The process is broken," he said.

**The world's a different place; with change, do we need to change the way of coming up with proposals?**

**People coming into the policy world today are being educated by teachers who don't understand how public policy works.** "Kids come out of school lacking a basic understanding of how things work, yet these are the people we're electing and sending to the Legislature," an interviewer said. "There's no collective understanding. This was evident in the Citizens League's Metropolitan Council Task Force. We're grappling with a new world we don't necessarily understand. Where in the system can you apply some pressure when the system has interacting elements?"

Gilje commented that the Metro Council Task Force didn't spend three or four months listening and learning. The advantage of listening and learning is that it puts people who don't know much at the beginning on equal footing with those who started out knowing more.

**The Civic Caucus needs to model this type of activity.** An interviewer said organizations must be explicit about the methods and the process they're using when looking at community problems. They must be clear about what the goal is, because the problem is defined in terms of the goal. And he said it seems a necessary precondition to involve leaders from business, foundations and others influential in the community. An active executive might be able to contribute resources to help fund an effort.

**The Citizens League's Program Committee from years past undertook an important task in choosing a problem to work on and then narrowing the topic by developing a very specific charge to a study committee.**

**We're distressed about how things are going at the Legislature.** Legislation dealing with a large variety of areas is all being bundled into omnibus bills, so leaders get to control things at the end of the legislative session, an interviewer asserted. "The Legislature is never going to reform on its own," she said. "An outside organization must come up with proposals. That is such an important thing. It's hard for legislators to resist good ideas from a good group."

Gilje noted that Verne Johnson, founder of the Civic Caucus, always stressed the importance of looking at the structure of government. Johnson said participants can't solve this themselves. They need the help of outsiders. But many organizations, Gilje said, don't dare comment on the Legislature.

"The process in the Legislature is nonsensical," said an interviewer. "It doesn't even allow for policy debate. We're trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. The process is so broken that it doesn't even allow for people who are interested to fix it."

**Can we get agreement on what the goal is?** Civic Caucus Chair Dan Loritz said we should come up with the goal, look at the problems in achieving that goal and determine the how of dealing with those problems. Gilje suggested the following goal: Minnesota could do a better job of coming up with proposals.

**We have to pay attention to how Minnesota is changing.** An interviewer said we must look at demographic changes in the state and their impact. For example, the population is aging and health care costs are driven by aging. Also, new immigrants and other factors are diversifying the population. "We must think about who we are in Minnesota and who we will be in 2030," he said.

**We need to think about who the audience for the report would be and work back from there.**

**Perhaps the report should concentrate on sending better proposals to the Legislature.** In response to that suggestion, Gilje said we're trying to sell our ideas to legislators, so we should concentrate on people getting better proposals to the Legislature. "Who are the buyers and who are the sellers in the public-policy world?" he asked. "I think the public needs to be selling its ideas to the Legislature, rather than the other way around."

An interviewer commented that you can think of policy ideas as seeds. If those seeds land on bad soil, they'll never take root. "The bad soil is, to a significant degree, the structure and processes of government and nongovernment," he said. "If we're going to have omnibus bills and crazy systems by which laws get made, we can rain good ideas down, but it doesn't matter; they're all going to die in that bad soil. And we heard in [our interview with Minnesota Philanthropy Partners' Ann Mulholland](#) that the nonprofit community is not really representing the community it should serve."

Another interviewer commented that the process as it goes on right now at the Legislature really strengthens the legislative leadership. The system, she said, was designed to work so that a bill has a hearing, legislators hear from people on both sides of the issue and vote for or against the bill that comes forward. Voters can tell which way their legislators voted on a particular bill. But now, everything is being folded into the huge omnibus bills. "It's much worse than it's ever been," she said. "It used to work a lot better."

An interviewer said he's been told that there are a number of legislators who finally have had it with the current system. "Who's out there supporting them? Perhaps the Civic Caucus."

**An outside group looking at the legislative process might be able to accomplish something that would be in the public interest of the state.** "We want receptivity to public-policy proposals that are in the public interest," an interviewer continued.

**The nongovernmental side of the public-policy process is too casual.** Gilje continued that organizations don't understand what they need to do. They don't fully appreciate how important it is to do thorough background work in advance. We don't have anything here like Music Director Osmo Vänskä faces each time the Minnesota Orchestra performs: critics in the media. "What if someone were to criticize a public-policy recommendation for not being based on fact, not representing any analysis and being so modest that it won't lead us anywhere?" Gilje asked.

**Foundations are like lemmings.** An interviewer continued that they all follow what the latest hot topic is.

**Bringing academic research to bear on public issues in a way legislators can understand is a model of a way to do what we're talking about.** An interviewer commented that the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota studied various transportation issues for the Legislature, with funding from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT). The academics involved in the research met four times a year with interested legislators to discuss their research and what it meant for Minnesota. These sessions, the interviewer said, educated legislators about various transportation issues so they could ask intelligent questions of interest groups and lobbyists. "This is a mechanism we might want to consider," the interviewer said.

**Various public-policy entities ought to do their work by being more open.** Gilje continued that the entities ought to be more humble about what they need to learn and much more open to debate and discussion. The hope is that by doing that, ultimately they'd be able to put something together to benefit the whole community.