



St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman

Invest in transit, change K-12 education governance, find legislative candidates who'll put the state first

A Civic Caucus Gubernatorial Candidate Interview October 20, 2017

Present: John Adams, Steve Anderson, Janis Clay (executive director), Chris Coleman, Pat Davies, Sarah Erickson, Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Paul Ostrow (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams. By phone: Dan Loritz.

Summary

Minnesota gubernatorial candidate and Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman makes the following points in discussing key areas affecting Minnesota's competitiveness as a state:

- In transportation, Coleman says we need to increase the gas tax and index it for inflation in order to keep pace with our transportation needs. He believes strongly that we must keep investing in transit and consider paying locally for new-start transit projects, like light-rail transit (LRT), rather than seeking federal funding.
- In K-12 education, he says the public education governance system is broken. Coleman says we should consider, in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, authorizing the mayor to appoint some or all members of the school board. And he believes we must recruit, incentivize and support more teachers of color to better reflect today's student population.
- In higher education, he says we must confront how the Minnesota State system and the University of Minnesota become more relevant to meeting the state's needs.
- On the state's public policymaking process, Coleman says we have a robust civic infrastructure in Minnesota, which has kept good ideas floating in the public sector. But it's hard to get good public policy enacted because the Legislature has become so partisan. He believes we must find enough people to run for the Legislature who put the state first.
- In health and human services, he says we must build out a mental health system in the state that addresses long-term issues, such as stress on hospital emergency rooms due to mental health problems, the lack of residential facilities for people with mental illnesses and the lack of a system to help people stay medicine compliant.

Biography

Chris Coleman is mayor of Saint Paul and a candidate for governor of Minnesota. He took office in 2006, after six years as a Saint Paul City Council member. Before that, he was active as a community and neighborhood leader. In 1987, Coleman began working as both a prosecutor and public defender in Hennepin County. He has private-sector work experience as a financial advisor at RBC Dain Rauscher.

As mayor, Coleman advocated for education and public safety, and championed the Green Line (Central Corridor Light Rail Line), the largest infrastructure project ever undertaken in Minnesota. He is past president of the National League of Cities, a national organization of city leaders across the country.

Coleman has a B.A. degree in political science from the University of Minnesota and a law degree from the University of Minnesota Law School.

Background

Continuing its focus on Minnesota's competitiveness, since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On November 27, 2016, the Caucus issued a report based on that review, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). As part of its review of Minnesota's public-policy process, in October 2017, the Civic Caucus began a series of interviews with major, announced candidates for the office of governor of Minnesota. The interviews are centered on what can be done to keep Minnesota and its people competitive in a number of realms. This interview with Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman is the second in that series.

Discussion

1. Opening Remarks.

Gubernatorial candidate Chris Coleman believes the City of Saint Paul has made a lot of progress during his 12 years as mayor. Coleman pointed to a new vitality in the city, investment in transportation, new businesses downtown, investment in civic infrastructure and investment in education through programs like the [Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood](#), a geographically limited, wrap-around support for families and children; the [Sprockets](#) out-of school program; and investment to try to bring prosperity to every corner of the city, such as the construction of the Arlington Hills Community Center on the East Side, which is both a library and a recreation center.

He said he has provided good stewardship of the city's public resources during his time in office, trying to "steer through the challenges we have faced, such as the Great Recession." Saint Paul has an annual budget of over \$500 million and there have been financial challenges, such as trying to have enough police officers and making sure the streets get plowed correctly. Coleman quipped that inadequate snowplowing can be "the death of mayors."

"We've looked toward the future and the needs of the community," he said. "We've tried to understand the challenges we face in the 21st century in Minnesota. I think we've made some progress, although we still have a long way to go in terms of solving all the challenges we face."

Coleman said he's passionate about Minnesota because of what we've built up over generations. He spoke of leaders like longtime DFL State Senator Jack Davies from Minneapolis, who served from 1959 to 1982, and Coleman's late father, longtime DFL State Senator Nick Coleman from Saint Paul, who served from 1963 to 1980. "They made Minnesota a national model for how states can work," he said. Coleman said Minnesota is very different today from what it was in the early 1970s, when then-Governor Wendell Anderson appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with the heading "Minnesota: The State That Works." "It's an example of how Minnesota can be a leader again, facing and confronting a community that's very different from what it was 40 or 50 years ago," Coleman said.

Every one of the 860 large and small communities in Minnesota has its own opportunities and faces its own challenges. Coleman made that remark and said we must figure out how to unleash some of those opportunities. "How can the state be a catalyst in some of the work we're doing in helping communities grow?" he asked.

What will it take for Minnesota to continue to be a leader? Coleman asked that question and said the criteria that Amazon has put out for cities as it looks for a second headquarters location can be a roadmap for what we need to do as a state. "They're the qualities that any company will be looking for," he said. "They're looking for a first-class, educated workforce; a vibrant community; communities that have invested in transportation; a place where they can thrive, largely because they'll be able to attract the talent they need."

"Communities investing in their transportation networks, like Denver, are thriving, while the ones that aren't are dying," Coleman said. "We're doing very well in this region, but we need to continue to invest in order to be able to grow and prosper. We're not going to be great because we disinvest ourselves in education or in infrastructure. We're going to be great because we made smart, strategic investments that have propelled the economy forward."

2. Transportation.

We need to increase the gas tax. Coleman gave that response to an interviewer's question about how to fund roads and bridges at the state, township, city and county levels. Coleman said his theme over the years has been, "Don't tell me what you want, unless you tell me how you're going to pay for it or what you're going to do without in order to achieve that. We can't say we want a first-class transportation system and a first-class transit system and first-class infrastructure without being willing to pay for that."

Coleman said the gas tax needs to be increased and also indexed to keep pace with inflation. "That's not necessarily very popular," he said, "but people are beginning to understand the complexities of the problem we face and that we do need to pay for it somehow. The challenge is, as vehicles become more efficient and we travel less, the gas tax alone is not going to be able to do that." He said perhaps we could use miles traveled and track that somehow. Trucks cause tremendous wear and tear on our roads, so we could look at an increase in license and vehicle fees.

We must consider the option of paying for transit projects locally, rather than seeking federal funding.

Coleman made that remark and noted that some metro counties have a sales tax to help pay for transit. Coleman said we need to expand the authority, particularly for Ramsey and Hennepin Counties, to increase the transit sales tax to maybe a full one percent, instead of the half of one percent that it is currently in those two counties.

He said Denver has decided not to seek federal funding for new-start transit projects, because those federal funds are basically drying up. Also, he said, by the time you jump through all the hoops to seek federal funding, the inflation on the projects has increased and that offsets a significant portion of what you get in federal funds. If we can figure out how to get these projects done more quickly, using local sources of revenue, they're going to be cheaper.

"By the time you've gone through all the hoops to get federal funding, the project is 50 percent higher than it was to begin with," Coleman said. "So, the nominal costs of going it alone, if you can get those projects in the ground more quickly, are probably not as dramatic as they might seem." He said we must look at the option of building transit projects on our own. "We can't spend a decade trying to build each LRT [light-rail transit] line," he said.

"We need a statewide transportation plan and then we must implement the plan," he continued. "Local transit projects are the railroads of the 1850s and the freeways of the 1950s. We must get out of the idea that dollars from Worthington are coming to fund transit projects in the Twin Cities, which is not true. But that's the mythology."

We have lost companies that were considering coming to Minnesota because we don't have a way to get people to jobs in the suburbs. Coleman made that remark in response to an interviewer's comment that not all jobs are in downtown Minneapolis or Saint Paul, but most of our transit system is focused on getting people downtown. He said the number-one issue for companies is whether we have the workforce to fill, for example, 5,000 jobs at a distribution center. That also includes getting people to those jobs.

Coleman said many companies are looking for large, single-floor facilities, which leads them to the more distant suburbs. A number of the people who need those jobs live in Minneapolis or Saint Paul. "How do we

get people from where they live to Shakopee?" he asked. He suggested that bus rapid transit (BRT) or special-service buses might offer a solution. "We must build out the transit networks," he said. "We can't just build spokes into downtown Minneapolis."

3. Education.

The education governance model is broken. Coleman made that remark in response to an interviewer's comments and questions about K-12 education. The interviewer said that until the late 1980s, the state had the public education system acting as a public utility. "It gave good service, but it never changed much," the interviewer said. Then, in the late 1980s, the state authorized the Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program, allowing 11th- and 12th-grade public school students to attend classes at any postsecondary institution in Minnesota for free. That was followed by state authorization of area learning centers, open enrollment, graduation incentives and, in 1991, chartered schools.

"The state changed life fundamentally for the school districts," the interviewer said. "But the state has never given the district system the opportunity to compete successfully in this new world that's been created for them. It's a huge problem. It tends to push school districts to try to get rid of the competition. The state needs to start thinking about how you give the districts the flexibility and incentives to change the system. Doesn't the state, in fairness, need to give public school districts an opportunity to compete successfully in this environment?"

Coleman responded that the governance system in public education is broken. "School boards feel they can't make a change because a handful of parents don't want it," he said. "They can't close schools."

People don't know that school board elections exist, he said. "It's a completely unaccountable level of governance," he said. School board members respond to parents who say, 'Don't make changes that affect *my* family.' We must change the governance model."

Mayoral control of schools in cities like Chicago and Boston allows people to know which elected official is responsible for the school system. Coleman made that remark and noted that mayoral control of the schools wouldn't work in smaller communities or multi-jurisdictional school districts. But it might work in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. "It's not that mayoral control in other cities has eliminated all the disparities," he said. "But at least people could say, 'You are my elected official who is responsible for this.'"

Mayoral control wouldn't have to be more than appointing the school board, Coleman said. "If [as mayor] I had the authority to appoint the school board, or at least appoint certain members of the school board, [they] would have a broader perspective on governance and might actually have some knowledge of how you govern a \$700 million to \$800 million enterprise. Then we might have some authority to make some changes."

We need more people in the front of the classroom who are representative of the entire classroom of students. Coleman made that remark in response to an interviewer's question about what we can do as a state to attract more people of color into teaching. "How do we recruit, how do we incentivize, how do we support teachers of color?" Coleman asked. "There are too many teachers who are afraid of the kids they're teaching and don't know how to relate to them. How do you teach someone you're afraid of?"

An interviewer commented that it's one thing to recruit people of color into a school or a system. But it's another thing to be willing to have those people you bring in influence how the system works. The interviewer pointed to a school in Washington, D.C., which has all students of color and an all-male staff, predominately African American and Latino. The teachers at the school have been given the opportunity to affect how they operate and how they teach.

"We can't have one part of society where the vast majority of people are failing and then a few people at the top who are succeeding," the interviewer said.

"We have never confronted in this country and this state the issue of race and the terrible disparities," Coleman responded. In the 1980s, Saint Paul schools were 85 percent white, he said. Now the schools are 80 percent kids of color. He said the school system still reflects the days when white students made up a large majority of the district's enrollment. "Our systems have to change," he said.

During Coleman's time as mayor, all 2,900 Saint Paul city employees completed racial bias and equity training. The overall message to employees, he said, is that they must work on behalf of all people in Saint Paul. All departments were asked to complete a racial equity plan. For example, employees were asked to look at the question of how decisions we make around street maintenance disproportionately impact people of color. He noted that an audit of the Saint Paul Fire Department showed that all parts of the city were getting equal services.

Coleman said the city's Human Rights Department was revamped into the Department of Human Rights and Equal Economic Opportunity Department. The city is exceeding compliance by aiming to award 30 percent (rather than 10 percent) of contracts for projects like the Saint Paul Saints' CHS Field to women-owned or minority-owned businesses.

The state agencies must have a similar equal-opportunities lens, he said. The State Department of Transportation must have a racial equity plan. "The only person who can lead that effort is the governor," he said.

We must confront how the University of Minnesota (U of M) and Minnesota State become relevant to the state of Minnesota. Coleman gave that response to an interviewer's comment that governors in Minnesota have been invisible in challenging higher education institutions to help the state. He asked Coleman how he sees the U of M and Minnesota State serving the state.

Coleman said he has looked at how we can connect the Minnesota State system to meeting the state's needs. "The system will have to undergo changes," he said. "We need someone willing to make disruptive change. We need to make changes in the structure."

"The 'U' is one of the more critical aspects of the state," Coleman said. He suggested the University, through its Extension programs, could play a dramatic role in breaking the divide on the water issue and the buffer-zone issue. There should be programs out of the U of M showing farmers how to reduce the chemical load on the Minnesota River, while also increasing their own efficiency. And he asked what the U of M could do to revitalize Virginia, Minnesota.

The U of M must be more integrated into the community. Coleman gave that response to an interviewer's comments that the U of M and Minnesota State have no plan for connecting with the state's K-12 education system in their academic and facilities planning. "We're planning for the same population," the interviewer said. "When will there be questions about how we can do this together?"

While saying that the U of M must be more integrated into the community, Coleman said he believes U of M President Eric Kaler is doing more work directly in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. "I'm seeing the 'U' having a more direct role in the outcomes of the K-12 system," Coleman said, such as trying to make sure students are ready for the PSEO program. He's not sure how joint facilities planning between the two systems would work.

4. The Public Policymaking Process in Minnesota.

We have a robust civic infrastructure in Minnesota. Coleman gave that response to an interviewer's question about how well the public-policy process in the state works today. The interviewer commented that

Minnesota's public-policy process has, at least in the past, been one of the things making the state competitive with other states. She asked whether the Legislature and the governor are getting enough good public-policy ideas from individuals, organizations and institutions in the state.

Coleman said the state's robust civic infrastructure has kept good ideas floating in the public sector. "But that's difficult to do when things are so partisan," he said. "My Dad (longtime State Senator Nick Coleman) would no longer recognize the Legislature, because it's become so partisan. The Legislature has become a blood sport. They have to figure out how to move forward after coming to an agreement."

Coleman criticized the rush at the end of recent legislative sessions, when big Omnibus bills are presented at the last minute and legislators are meeting well after midnight for days in a row. "You shouldn't make policy for 5 million people when you haven't slept for three or four days," he said.

"Nothing happening has become a victory for one side," Coleman continued. "It's hard to get good public policy enacted. We need to find enough people to run for the Legislature who put the state first."

Does the governor have a role in pushing the Legislature to abide by the single-subject bill requirement in the Minnesota Constitution? An interviewer asked that question and noted that the [Civic Caucus has joined an amicus brief](#) on the single-subject requirement in a case now before the State Supreme Court. She suggested that the governor could say he or she won't tolerate multi-subject bills, especially the large omnibus bills brought up at the end of the legislative session.

Coleman responded that the large, last-minute bills often contain drafting errors and "Nobody knows what's in them. It's a terrible way to run a railroad." As governor, he would engage in the legislative process earlier and further upstream. But, he said, "The governor can't dictate how the Legislature operates."

He said the Legislature could set a schedule for bills to pass before the last weeks of the session. "There's no reason we have to sit there and wait," Coleman said. "Business leaders can't stand sitting there and waiting. It's a game played up to the final moments of the legislative session. Historically, it has worked, but it's breaking down now because of other breakdowns."

Is the State of Minnesota equipping its governor with adequate resources for planning? An interviewer asked that question and then clarified it by asking whether we need a State Planning Agency or its function. (In 1965, the Legislature created the State Planning Agency as part of the executive branch "to engage in a program of comprehensive statewide planning" and to "act as a directing, advisory, consulting, and coordinating agency to harmonize activities at all levels of government." In 2003, Gov. Tim Pawlenty signed an executive order eliminating the agency.)

Coleman responded by saying that during his time as mayor, the City of Saint Paul went through each of its departments to see if it was efficient. "No business would exist without reexamining its practices," he said. "We asked, 'How are they innovating and looking to reduce their spending?'"

Minnesota is a collection of communities that all need support. Coleman gave that response to an interviewer's question about how we can overcome the competition between Greater Minnesota and the metro area. "How can we instill the idea that we're all in this together?" the interviewer asked.

"I don't break it down in terms of Greater Minnesota and the metro area," Coleman responded. "I've always approached this as what do cities need from the state, such as broadband internet and access to medical services. When you break it down that way, it isn't Saint Paul vs. Moorhead; it's what all the communities need."

How do we create community when people are so focused on their own needs? An interviewer asked that question and Coleman responded, "We still gather around certain tables building community," he said.

"That's why community schools are important. A lot of our institutions have broken down, such as faith-based communities."

Coleman said his children, who went to Saint Paul public schools, didn't go to the community school, so they had no neighborhood friends. "The education system has broken down communities," he said. Building community is not easy, but it starts with things like National Night Out.

5. Health and Human Services.

We don't have a mental health system. Coleman gave that response to an interviewer's comments and questions about the large increases in health and human services spending. The interviewer said health and human services make up the second largest part of the state budget. He said recent changes in the child protection system have resulted in a huge increase in the number of children who are wards of the state. He pointed to the high number of children going into state hospitals because they are mentally ill and asked about Minnesota's sex-offender facility, the largest in the country. "What do we do?" he asked Coleman.

Coleman responded that the state doesn't have a mental health system. He said we've done study after study on the kind of system we need to create. "It's a huge issue in hospital emergency departments and we don't have enough residential facilities," he said. "And there's no system to be sure people are medicine-compliant. We must build out a mental health system that addresses these long-term issues."

He noted that the issue of Minnesota's sex offender program is still in federal court. "Our whole approach to it is based on false premises about recidivism," he said.

Coleman said he would return for a Civic Caucus interview if he is elected governor.