



Hennepin County Commissioner Jeff Johnson

Dip into general fund for transportation, Offer private-school vouchers to some families, Veto legislative bills not restricted to single subject

A Civic Caucus Gubernatorial Candidate Interview
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Present

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Summary

Minnesota Republican gubernatorial candidate and Hennepin County Commissioner Jeff Johnson says he is running for governor because he wants to give people more control over their own money, health care and businesses. He believes government has taken too much control over the past 50 years. He says he is the only candidate for governor who can address the rural/urban/suburban divide.

Johnson advocates the following positions:

- Transportation funding: Don't look to the gas tax for long-term financing of Minnesota's transportation needs, because revenue from the tax will continue to drop. Rely on at least some money from the general fund.
- Transit: Stop building light-rail transit (LRT). Spend more money on improving the bus system, which is more flexible, much less expensive and can get people where they need to go.
- K-12 education: Expand school choice to include private-school vouchers, at least for families whose children are enrolled in schools that are not performing. Simplify the education funding system. Make practical and technical training based on employers' needs available in high schools. Put less emphasis on standardized tests to measure school performance.
- Public-policy process: Veto any legislative bill not meeting the state Constitutional requirement that each bill be restricted to a single subject. Veto any bill not posted for at least 48 hours before debate on the bill begins. Enlist the help of Democrats who agree with his priorities.
- Health care: Take back state control of health care, whether through elimination of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or waivers. Ensure competition among insurers and among providers. Eliminate mandates in health care and give people more options. Allow individuals receiving subsidized health insurance on a government plan the option of taking that money and using it to buy insurance in the market.
- Business climate: We tax too much and have too many regulations. Make the regulatory process move at the speed of business, not at the speed of government.

Biography

Jeff Johnson, Plymouth, is Hennepin County Commissioner for the Seventh District and a Republican candidate for governor of Minnesota. He was first elected county commissioner in 2008 and is in his third and final term. From 2001 to 2007, he served in the Minnesota House of Representatives, where he served as assistant majority leader from 2003 to 2007 and chaired the Civil Law and Elections Committee from 2005 to 2007.

In 2014, Johnson was the Republican candidate for governor of Minnesota, but lost to incumbent Gov. Mark Dayton by five percent. He was the Republican candidate for state attorney general in 2006 and lost to Lori Swanson. He was elected Republican national committeeman from Minnesota in April 2011 and reelected in 2012 to a full four-year term. On May 10, 2017, Johnson announced that he would again seek the Republican endorsement for governor of Minnesota.

Following his graduation from law school in 1992, Johnson practiced at the law firms of Lord, Bissell and Brook in Chicago and Parsinen, Kaplan & Levy in Minneapolis. He joined Cargill, Inc., in 1998, practicing employment and labor law until starting his own company, Midwest Employment Resources, providing employment law and human resources services to companies throughout the country.

A native of Detroit Lakes, Minn., Johnson received a B.A. degree in economics and political science/history from Concordia College in Moorhead in 1989 and a J.D. degree from Georgetown University Law School in 1992.

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](#). 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 Hennepin County Commissioner Jeff Johnson is the fourth in that series.

Discussion

1. Opening Remarks.

Jeff Johnson is running for governor to give people back the control government has taken over the past 50 years. Johnson said he wants to give people more control over their own money, health care and businesses. He said his guiding principle is his belief that we as a society have become more focused on institutions than on people. For example, he said, we're focused on the school, instead of what's best for the student, or the union or company, instead of what's best for the worker.

2. Transportation.

Focusing on the gas tax for long-term financing of transportation doesn't make sense. Johnson made that remark and said revenue from the gas tax will continue to drop because of more fuel-efficient cars and the possibility that people will be driving less. "We're building towards today rather than for 50 years from now," he said. "We are going to have to rely on at least some money from the general fund."

An interviewer asked why the general fund is so attractive for transportation, when there are all kinds of opportunities for user fees. Johnson said transportation at the state level is funded almost solely from user fees now. "But as we talk about needing to spend more, an argument can be made for dipping into the general fund," he said. Everyone, even those who don't drive, relies on freeways for emergency vehicles and for food to get to grocery stores.

Johnson supports spending more money on improving the bus system and is not in favor of light-rail transit (LRT). He said he supports transit options for those who need them, but he believes the cost/benefit ratio for LRT is not favorable. "The tremendous cost far outweighs the very small congestion-relief benefit," he said. Instead, Johnson supports spending more money on a better bus system. "It's much more flexible, much less expensive and can get people where they need to go," he said.

"Fixed rail lines are not the future of transportation," Johnson said. "We must look more long term." He said we must look at the bigger picture. "When we look at what futurists are predicting 15 or 20 years forward, transportation will look nothing like it looks right now. At some point, it will probably be the case that few people will be driving their own cars."

An interviewer asked how the transportation system could be a tool to enhance the ability of lower-income people to get to work. "That's an argument for beefing up the bus system," Johnson responded. "You can move a bus line to get to new development. Buses make more sense."

3. K-12 Education.

Johnson questions whether we should be basing the measurement of K-12 student achievement solely on tests and grades. He made that remark in response to comments and questions by an interviewer about the disagreement over what "achievement" means for students and what "performance" means for schools. The interviewer said that public opinion surveys show that people most want schools to provide students with character development, behavior standards and workforce readiness. Only 35 percent of schools are doing well on those measures, the interviewer said. And polls show that eight out of 10 Americans want students to be engaged in learning in schools. The interviewer asked to what extent student engagement rather than student performance should be the route to measuring school success.

Johnson said he tends to agree that we focus too much on standardized testing in comparing schools. He said we do need some level of standardized testing, but students also learn from extracurricular activities, such as sports, music and community service. Academics are the primary reason kids are in school, but we can't ignore these other forms of learning.

Johnson said practical and technical training based on employers' needs should be available in high schools. He said small employers can't find people with the training they need to fill jobs. When asked by an interviewer what students would say should be changed in schools, Johnson said his sons and their friends say there should be more focus on extracurricular activities and practical learning.

The education funding system has been built on the political deals necessary to pass education omnibus bills, not on what's good for students. Johnson gave that response when asked about what he sees as the most effective way to fund schools in Minnesota and what role equity should play in the funding system. He said he focused on education when he was in the Legislature. "The K-12 finance system is horrific and so complex," he said. "Only a handful of people truly understand it. The more we can simplify it, the better."

Johnson's goal as governor is to focus on the education achievement gap in Minnesota. "It's ridiculous that we're one of the worst in the country," he said. "But when we're talking about the achievement gap, it's not necessarily about funding." There is high per pupil funding in some of the schools doing the most poorly, he said. "It's not about the money. That's not the solution."

Johnson said we must bring in teachers and administrators who've been involved in turning failing schools around. And he said giving people more choices is part of the solution.

Johnson would extend school choice beyond just public schools to include private schools, at least for families whose children are enrolled in schools that are not performing. He spoke about a parent trigger program in New Jersey that goes into effect for parents of children in a school that is failing, however that is defined. The parents can make the decision about what happens next, whether they choose to change the administration of the school, become a charter school or receive vouchers to send their children to private schools. "Most people in Minneapolis don't want to open-enroll their child in Woodbury or Wayzata. They want to improve their neighborhood school, but they feel powerless to make change," he said.

The measure of school performance shouldn't be solely based on standardized tests, but also on graduation rates. Johnson gave that response when an interviewer expressed frustration over measuring achievement exclusively through student performance on standardized tests. Another interviewer took issue with measuring school performance by graduation rates, saying the rates are easily manipulated by schools.

Hennepin County has started to work with K-12 schools in the county. Johnson explained that community members and Hennepin County staff meet quarterly with superintendents and school staff to review how students who are within the county's system are doing in school. The biggest problem, he said, is sharing data. "We're trying to talk and coordinate as best we can," he said. "In some cases, having a county presence in the schools might make sense." That could possibly include county child-protection workers and other staff sometimes meeting with students at their schools, rather than requiring the students to come to the county.

Johnson favors using the scholarship format for preschool education to get children ready for kindergarten.

4. Higher Education.

Should we reinstate the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB)? An interviewer asked that question saying the board could look at the question of getting students ready for the real world through both vocational-technical programs and four-year colleges. The interviewer also said the board could look at the question of whether we're getting what we're paying for in our state public postsecondary system.

Johnson responded that he did not know the background of the elimination of HECB, but would be open to possibly bringing it back. One interviewer commented that the state's public postsecondary institutions thought HECB had too much power in making decisions. Another interviewer commented that over the years, the Legislature took away the policy role HECB used to play. Today, the surviving Office of Higher Education's (OHE) role is focused mainly on financial aid and on regulation of private nonprofit and for-profit postsecondary institutions, with a very limited role in budget recommendations for the University of Minnesota (U of M) and Minnesota State, formerly known as the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system.

(Note: The Minnesota Legislature started a state-coordinating role in higher education in 1965, with the creation of the Minnesota Liaison and Facilities Commission. The Commission was renamed the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) in 1967, which was renamed the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) in 1975.

HECB was a citizen board responsible for statewide planning and, in its earlier years, for reviewing new program proposals from postsecondary institutions in the state and reviewing and recommending system budget proposals for the U of M and MnSCU. HECB was abolished by the Legislature in 1995 and certain of its duties were transferred elsewhere. It was replaced with the Higher Education Services Office and that office was replaced in 2005 by the Office of Higher Education (OHE), which was designated a cabinet-level agency.)

5. Public-Policy Process.

Leaders who succeed are able to find areas we can agree on. Johnson gave that response to an interviewer's question about what characteristics a governor would need in order to change the partisan atmosphere in state government. Johnson said he has worked with Democrats both when he served in the Legislature and currently as a Hennepin County commissioner, since he is the only Republican on the county board.

Johnson believes that if Minnesota elects a Republican governor in 2018, we will likely have a Republican House. (The Senate is not up for election in 2018.) "But I don't think in the long term it'll be successful for the

governor if everything passes strictly on party lines," he said. "My job will be to find Democrats who agree with me on my priorities and enlist their help--and offer them cover, if necessary."

Johnson stated that he is the only gubernatorial candidate who can address the rural/urban/suburban divide. He has a background in Greater Minnesota, has represented the suburbs and has had an emphasis on urban problems during his time on the Hennepin County Board. "I have tried to spend time in North Minneapolis with community leaders--business people, teachers and principals," he said. "We talk about what government is doing that's working and what government is doing that's making things worse."

Where are policy ideas generated today? Johnson said for Hennepin County, many good ideas come from county staff members, because they see what's happening every day in implementing county policies. An interviewer commented that there is a lot of pressure on the county commissioners to see they have diversity among the county staff, so that they're getting diverse views. "It's important to get ideas from staff, but you must pay attention to how you bring staff on board, so that it's more representative of the broader population," the interviewer said.

Maybe we should move the planning function of the Metropolitan Council to a state agency and put elected local officials on the Met Council. Johnson gave that response to an interviewer's question of whether we need a State Planning Agency again.

"I think all of what the Met Council was created to do still makes sense today," Johnson said. "But they have gone so far afield of that. They have taxing authority, even though they're not elected, which I just have a fundamental problem with."

"Part of their job is planning. So, if we could take that part of their job and move it to an actual state agency that is funded through the normal legislative process, through elected officials, that might be part of the solution to my Met Council problem."

An interviewer asked whether the Met Council's members should be elected, to which Johnson replied, "I think one of two things should happen. It either should be elected—I don't love the idea of directly electing them, but I at least think it should be populated with elected officials."

The interviewer commented, "You're not elected unless you're elected to the seat in which you're voting."

"Then to me, that's probably not the best answer," Johnson responded. "The better answer is the Met Council's budget should go through the Legislature as if it's a state agency."

"It is a state agency now," the interviewer said. "The chair came off the governor's staff."

"But they aren't necessarily funded that way," Johnson replied. "They still have that taxing power and they have the power of eminent domain, which I have problems with. Ideally, they would be elected, but I think a better way to do it would be if they were county commissioners and city council members. Otherwise, take their taxing authority away."

Johnson said he doesn't believe we can tinker around the edges of the Met Council but need to actually eliminate it and start over with a regional body that has very limited powers and is either elected or does not have taxing authority.

How can the governor impact the legislative process in a positive way? An interviewer asked that question and pointed particularly to the problem of omnibus bills being negotiated by a select few. Johnson said legislators are taking things that would never pass on their own and putting them in omnibus bills.

"Every session ends the same way, with a few people behind a closed door doing the negotiating," Johnson said. "These bills have 700 pages and legislators have no idea what's in them. The Legislature ends up in special session time after time. There has been a 57 percent increase in state spending from the general fund over the last eight or 10 years. Nobody knows what he or she is voting on in these huge bills. We get so much bad law because of what's happening."

The governor can fix the omnibus bill problem through the veto pen. Johnson said he would veto any bill not meeting the state Constitutional requirement that each legislative bill be restricted to a single subject. "I don't know how else to make it more enforceable, if the courts won't do it," he said. And he said he would veto any bill not posted for at least 48 hours before debate on that bill begins.

"This is as bipartisan an issue as there can be," he said, noting that Sen. John Marty (DFL-Roseville) is also behind enforcing the single-subject requirement.

(Note: The [Civic Caucus has joined an amicus brief](#) on the single-subject requirement in a case now before the Minnesota Supreme Court.)

Johnson said he would work with the Legislature to return to having more active subcommittees.

6. Health Care.

Johnson has three principles he follows regarding health care. He said he does not know what will happen at the federal level on health care, but he believes in these three principles:

1. Minnesota can make health care decisions better than the federal government. He favors any way the state can get back control of health care, whether elimination of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or waivers.
2. There must be competition among insurers and among providers.
3. The more control individuals have over their own health care, the better.

We should eliminate mandates in health care and give people more options, Johnson said. Allow people to choose catastrophic health insurance policies if that better fits their needs. "That leaves the problem of pre-existing conditions," he said. "But Minnesota's former high-risk pool dealt with that problem pretty well. It was expensive, but Minnesotans were willing to pay for it."

Minnesota had the best healthcare coverage in America before the ACA. Johnson gave that response to an interviewer's question about MinnesotaCare, a health care program for Minnesotans with low incomes. Enrollees get health care services through a health plan. They can choose their health plan from those serving MinnesotaCare enrollees in their county. MinnesotaCare is funded by a state tax on Minnesota hospitals and health care providers, Basic Health Program funding, and enrollee premiums and cost sharing. Johnson said he would move to allow individuals receiving subsidized health insurance on a government plan the option of taking that money and using it to buy insurance in the market.

7. Human Services

Johnson agrees with the court that said Minnesota's sex offender treatment program is unconstitutional. Johnson gave that response to an interviewer's comment that no one ever gets out of the sex offender program. "People who want to do something about the program are scared to death that someone will get out and kill someone," Johnson said. "We haven't seen any leadership on this issue. We must sit down with the legislative leadership from both sides and hammer out decisions about release of offenders that don't have political implications."

8. Business Climate

We tax too much and we have too many regulations. Johnson gave that response to an interviewer's question about improving the business climate. He said he would be open to continuing the state's [Angel Tax Credit Program](#), which provides tax benefits for those who invest in certain start-up businesses. We must change how we regulate, he said, because the regulatory process takes too much time. "We must permit at the speed of business, not the speed of government," he said..