



Summary of Meeting with Steve Sviggum

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, February 9, 2007

Guest speaker: State Rep. Steve Sviggum, Republican, former Speaker of the House

Attendance: Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), John Mooty (by phone), and Jim Olson (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting— The Civic Caucus has been learning about the elections process in Minnesota to see if polarization and paralysis in state government are related in any way to how people seek office, are endorsed, nominated and elected. On several occasions in recent weeks the role of the legislative caucuses has come up. Today we're meeting with Rep. Steve Sviggum, who served as House Speaker and head of the House Republican Caucus until the 2007 legislative session.

B. Welcome and introduction— On behalf of the caucus Paul welcomed Rep. Sviggum and introduced him. Sviggum, in his mid-50s, has the distinction of already having served in the Minnesota House for more than half his life. Sviggum was born in 1951 and was first elected in 1978. He was reelected to his 15th term in November 2006. He served as speaker from 1998 to 2006. Previously he was House minority leader for six years. So he headed up his legislative caucus for 14 years. He's a graduate of St. Olaf College and a

farmer/educator. Sviggum has recently been named a fellow of the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and will start teaching there in the fall.

C. Comments and discussion— During the comments of Sviggum and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. The difficult role of Speaker — Speaker of the House is a demanding, controversial position, Sviggum said. He was a lightning rod for issues. We say in our lives that friends come and go. With the Speaker, enemies accumulate. He could have filled his schedule 24 hours a day.

2. Legislative caucus serves as a balance to special interest

groups— The courts have ruled that independent expenditures are a part of the process. No limits exist on independent expenditures. In the last campaign, Education Minnesota (a teachers union) spent \$2.9 million on independent expenditures; AFSCME (a public employees union) spent \$1.9 million; and casinos, \$1.2 million. Other special interest groups are jobs now, transportation, Sierra Club, trial lawyers, and the family council. Special interest groups usually focus their independent expenditures on 30 to 40 districts where races are close. The legislative caucus becomes a balance to counter the special interest groups.

3. Legislative caucus fills a void because political party activity has

evaporated at the local legislative district level— The legislative caucus decided it had to control its own destiny. Political party activity largely has disappeared in many legislative districts. Without the legislative caucus entering the picture, there'd be no support for finding and supporting—in the case of Sviggum's caucus—Republican candidates. They need to find good people to run, and the candidates must have support, that is, leg work, field staff and

financial contributions. Elections are best served by having good people to run for office and the citizens having good choices on the ballot.

4. Personal role of the Speaker in fund raising — As Speaker, Sviggum said he personally raised most of the money for the House Republican caucus, which was \$2.4 million in 2005-2006. He said that his legislative caucus has a campaign steering committee of about seven or eight legislators who make decisions on how the funds are to be distributed among candidates. If the caucus weren't involved, the special interests like education, labor and business would largely determine whose campaigns would receive financial support through their independent expenditures with special interest advocacy.

5. Personal role of the Speaker in recruiting candidates— He said he has driven all over the state repeatedly—often getting home in the wee hours of the morning—to encourage candidates. He remembers, for example, one day he left the Legislature at 2:30 p.m., drove to Thief River Falls for an 8 p.m. meeting with a prospective candidate, and then drove back to St. Paul, arriving at 5:30 a.m., just in time to shower and shave and get ready for the next day. Some people would think that the legislative caucus is trying to enhance its power. But they're just trying to encourage good people to run.

6. Caucus control over legislators disputed— Sviggum said it is "absolutely wrong" to assume that legislators who were elected with significant legislative caucus support are then obligated to simply support positions of the caucus. He said that every member has a strong independent streak. They see themselves responsible to the voters of their district. They realize the importance of the legislative caucus, of course. The legislator from Kenyon, for example, knows that he or she must get support from other districts to pass legislation. Without that kind of cooperation and collaboration nothing would

pass. A caucus can be seen like a "team" (football, family, business etc.).

You recognize and respect differences of opinions and positions and hope and work for each other's success (in this case Minnesotans' success).

7. Polarization-paralysis problem challenged— Sviggum challenged claims by others that the Legislature is plagued by excessive polarization and paralysis. The Legislature today is far more open than it was 40 years ago when decisions were made by a few white men, maybe in a bar in St. Paul. No one wants to go back to those "good old days", Sviggum said. The irony is that the approval rating amongst citizens of the Legislature has gone down— but we'd never go back or accept the "good old days".

Newly elected legislative caucus leaders in the 2007 Legislature have the responsibility of stimulating cooperation among members of their caucuses. Legislative caucus leaders cannot act arbitrarily.

8. Problem of electing all Senators at the same election— Currently all state senators are elected at the same time every four years. He believes the law should be changed to that one-half of the Senate would be elected every two years. He recalled that in 2004 the Republican-controlled House passed bills, but the DFL-controlled Senate refused to take action. House members were up for election in 2004 and needed to show a record to the voters, but the Senate wouldn't be running until 2006. Such an impasse would be much less likely if some of the Senators would have been up for election in 2004. DFL majority Senators actually stated: "We don't need anything, were not up for election."

9. Ability to maintain close relationships across party lines— It was noted that a legislator in a previous meeting of the Civic Caucus said that it is difficult for a Republican and a DFL legislator to work together during the

session when each knows that the other's legislative caucus will be raising money to defeat the legislator in the next election. Sviggum said that informal gatherings of legislators are much easier within the confines of ones own legislative caucus. If he's going to go out for dinner, spending \$20 of his own money, he'd be much more likely to go to dinner with someone from his own caucus.

10. Balancing the best interests of the state with the best interests

of a legislator's district— In response to a question about the need to consider bold action that benefits the state, Sviggum said that some legislators lose sight of what's in the best interests of the state and vote the interests of their locality only, without an ability to cooperate or compromise for everyone's best interest.

11. Support for Robert Fulghum's philosophy— As a guide for legislative behavior, Sviggum said he philosophically thinks that Robert Fulghum had it right in his book, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten": play fair, clean up your own mess, don't hurt anyone. Every day work a little, play a little, sing a little, write a little and pray a little - "Balance".

12. Need to balance interests— Sviggum disputed that far left and far right policies are dominant. He said that a leader can't govern from either end. He doesn't want to be perfectly in the center, but balance is needed.

13. Sviggum's suggested legislative changes— Sviggum highlighted three changes he would support:

—Rotate terms of the State Senate, so that one-half of the seats would be up for election every two years, rather than the entire Senate running every four years.

—Don't allow ex-legislators to immediately become lobbyists as

soon as they leave office -"Revolving Door" legislation.

—Establish a bipartisan commission to be responsible for redistricting.

14. Possibility of limiting independent expenditures— Civic Caucus

members said they recall David Schultz saying that limits on the size of an independent expenditure for an individual candidate could be imposed. Sviggum said it is his understanding that the Supreme Court decision wouldn't permit limits. In continuing discussion he said that perhaps limits could be imposed by law on legislative caucuses, but he doesn't see how such limits could be imposed on special interest groups.

15. Reinvigorating the political parties at the local level?— Sviggum

said he doesn't see a great deal of confidence in political parties among citizens and that local involvement in party affairs attracts very few people.

16. Absence of "middle ground" voters at precinct caucuses— A member

commented that participation in the biennial precinct caucuses (the grass-roots party meetings that lead to candidate endorsement) seems heavily concentrated among persons on the far left or far right politically. The member asked whether changes might be considered that would enlarge the influence of people in the middle.

Sviggum said he supports the concept of multiple party endorsement for a given office, such as, for example, giving party endorsement to all candidates receiving at least 25 or 30 percent support for endorsement. He also would advance the date of the primary election.

He said he'd consider an idea of increasing the size of legislative districts and having some candidates run at-large within such districts. A

Civic Caucus member mentioned one idea that three House members could run

at-large in the same district, with a requirement that each political party would not be allowed to nominate candidates for more than two of the three at-large seats. Such an idea would guarantee at least one minority party candidate would get elected, irrespective of the political makeup of a district. However, others, including Sviggum, felt such an idea might be prohibited under the Minnesota constitution.

Sviggum said he supports a unicameral Legislature. It would be more accountable to the citizens, he said.

17. Make changes in legislative caucuses as campaign bodies?— If one accepts the fact that legislative caucuses are likely to continue to be dominant players in local legislative campaigns, Sviggum was asked whether any changes should be made, statutory or otherwise, that would make the campaign role of the legislative caucuses more visible to the people of the state. He said he has not thought about any possible changes.

18. Comparison with other states— While acknowledging problems in Minnesota, Sviggum said our problems are not like those of several other states, where legislative leaders are under indictment or in prison for their illegal activities.

19. Thanks— On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne Johnson thanked Sviggum for meeting with us today. He informed Sviggum that a draft of the summary of today's meeting will be distributed to Sviggum as soon as it is prepared. After Sviggum has made any changes, the summary will be circulated among some 500 persons on the Civic Caucus email distribution list.

***The Civic Caucus* is a non-partisan, tax-exempt educational organization. Core participants include persons of varying political persuasions, reflecting years of leadership in politics and business.**

A working group meets face-to-face to provide leadership. They are Verne C. Johnson, chair; Lee Canning, Charles Clay, Bill Frenzel, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty, Jim Olson, Wayne Popham and John Rollwagen.