



Civic Caucus Interview Group

Discussion

Diagnosis and prescription as important in public policy as in health care

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

Discussion was held on September 16, 2016

Present

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Summary

Today the Civic Caucus interview group focused its discussion on options for a major recommendation on improving public policy in Minnesota. In discussing definitions we distinguished between design and action. We looked at a timetable for completion of a report by December 1. We'd like to emphasize a central recommendation that if implemented would cause other improvements to occur, rather than preparing a laundry list of needed changes. Among options discussed today: (1) establishing a public-policy institute, (2) strengthening an existing community sector organization or organizations, (3) starting from scratch and recommending something entirely new, and (4) looking to the state's charitable foundations. Some of us think the report should also include recommendations on improving the State Legislature.

Background

For the past 12 months the Civic Caucus has been reviewing how in public policy issues become known, defined and analyzed and how proposals for change are developed and implemented. Some 39 individuals have been interviewed in separate meetings. In addition the Civic Caucus interview group has held about nine internal discussion meetings, including today's. Detailed notes of meetings are circulated to some 5,500 persons on the Civic Caucus email list. The Civic Caucus now is working on a report on public policy.

Discussion

Definition of public policy— We started by reviewing a working definition of public policy. We find it beneficial to distinguish between *public-policy design* and *public-policy action*.

* **Design**— We see public-policy design as a *proposal* for the steps that should be taken, for a given period of time, based on a given set of circumstances, to influence future decisions and actions.

* **Action**— We see public-policy action as the *actual steps* taken to make changes in current policy, for a given period of time, based on a given set of circumstances.

Our current activity is working more on the design side, as we review the development of actionable public-policy proposals in years past, today and in the future. Our work is based on the premise that strong, well-considered, actionable proposals will help yield good public-policy action.

Our current schedule— We reviewed the status of our current effort to produce a report by December 1, 2016, on the public-policy proposal process in Minnesota. We discussed the following tentative schedule:

By early October—Prepare a preliminary draft that can be circulated among our 5,500 email participants, for their comment and suggestions.

During October—Review comments and suggestions and revise the preliminary draft accordingly.

Late October—Prepare a revised draft, make changes and gain approval from Civic Caucus interview group.

Mid-November—Circulate the draft as approved by interview group among email participants, inviting signatures of support.

Early December—Distribute report publicly with signatures of support.

Recommendations for laying out our objectives —A member offered the following list of objectives for a Civic Caucus report on the public policy proposal process:

* To define and clarify the role of public policy in the community sector in Minnesota.

* To describe the key elements and principles of the "Minnesota Process" of public policy over the past 50 years.

* To highlight characteristics of the current public-policy environment and organizations, key issues, and concerns in Minnesota today.

* To summarize specific strengths and challenges of public policy in Minnesota today.

* To recommend specific actions to improve the public-policy process in Minnesota to have an immediate impact on the quality of life of all Minnesotans.

Try to find one major recommendation —We're going to be trying to design one major, central, recommendation which if implemented would cause other implementation to occur. In effect, we'd like

to create a "domino effect", in which the central recommendation (first domino to fall) causes other needed changes to occur as well. Such an effort seems most appropriate in our topic under study, public policy, because with so many individuals and groups involved, a list of recommendations could become almost endless, with none shining through as critical.

Several options for community sector leadership under discussion— As we have begun discussing recommendations we've concluded preliminarily that the need of the state for more leadership in the community sector in public policy could be the area where a central recommendation would emerge, assuring that the state's most critical public-policy issues are being carefully considered, with an emphasis on devising innovative solutions.

* **Establish a public-policy institute?**— We discussed whether something like the Washington State Institute for Public Policy ought to be considered. However, that organization is a governmental body, and we've been mainly exploring what ought to take place outside the governmental sphere.

* **Strengthen an existing organization(s)?**— Another option is further building on strengths of an existing nonprofit organization(s) with a long history of involvement in public policy.

* **Start from scratch; something entirely new?**— We've learned so much about significant changes affecting public policy in recent years, including changes in the media, the ways people come together for discussions, the dramatic changes in demographics, and other changes. Some persons are seriously suggesting that the old ways of coming up with public-policy proposals are unworkable today, and that perhaps something radically new needs to be put on the table. Maybe we could design something that would do a better job of being compatible with today's realities.

* **Look to foundations?**— We discussed the potential of turning to Minnesota's variety of foundations—community, corporate and private—many or all of which possess desirable characteristics of having always worked for the betterment of the people of the state, are independent, general-purposed, not aligned with any private or special interest, Minnesota-focused, as well as having valuable financial resources.

We wondered whether leadership would best come from one foundation on its own or from several working together. We discussed the possible joint leadership of the major community foundations. While foundations usually have acted individually, not as a group, there are exceptions, such as from 2009 to 2011 when six Minnesota foundations supported two major reports on setting priorities for use of state resources, *The Bottom Line* and *Beyond the Bottom Line*. Also, a number of foundations are cooperating now as Northside Funders Group, working together for the betterment of North Minneapolis.

Points raised in discussion about foundations— Traditionally, foundations seem to have played more of a supportive role, helping others achieve their objectives, as distinguished from being proactive. We asked whether it's conceivable that foundations, whether individually or together, would, for example, play the following key public-policy roles: (1) assembling lists of the most urgent public policy issues in the state; (2) laying out principles of the best ways to conduct studies of those issues; and (3) identifying a few issues that merit highest priority attention.

Some of us wondered whether foundations might also (4) establish a pool of funding for study of major issues.

If we are to recommend an enlarged role for foundations, we need to understand better the roles played by their boards of directors and their professional staffs, a member suggested. One participant said foundations could be triggers to action and we should educate the foundations, because higher education institutions and media won't do that.

Whatever happens in our report we ought to make sure that the report gets circulated broadly to as many foundations as possible. That means we ought to make sure our regular email list is as comprehensive as possible relative to foundations in the state, both boards of directors and top staff, a member suggested.

Don't ignore the need for legislative leadership— Let's not forget, a member cautioned, that those well-meaning proposals requiring legislative action for implementation are dependent upon a receptive, deliberative legislative body. Several concerns over the performance of the Minnesota Legislature have been raised, a member said, including excessive reliance on omnibus bills, rush to judgment, lack of hearings on major projects, and lack of transparency in decision-making. At the very least, the member said, legislative performance ought to be high on any priority list of projects needing analysis and proposals for action. Another member noted that public hearings seem to be dominated by advocacy groups on behalf, or opposed to, a given proposal, as if the process involves only special interests and lawmakers.

Some of us think that improvement in the legislative process deserves higher priority over improvement in the community sector. Have top leaders in the Minnesota Legislature today received too much power and influence relative to that of the other members? Is there too little reliance on subcommittees, where rank and file of both parties can work together on details?

Getting at root causes of a problem —A critical public policy proposal objective ought to be getting at root causes of problems, rather than addressing more obvious symptoms, a participant said. Such work requires intensive analysis about what really is behind a problem today and rarely is that immediately obvious. But the participant is unsure how committed foundations would be toward such an objective. Foundations can be under a lot of pressure from advocates for certain social concerns to provide funding for what the advocates sense is the solution to the problem.

Take advantage of new learning options, such as free online courses— A member suggested that it would be interesting if a respected institution of higher learning in Minnesota would put together a basic course of civics and distribute that course through an organization—such as Coursera—leading in online education through what are known as MOOCs (massive open online courses).

Are people more impatient today and less open to serious thinking in advance of action?— Some participants wondered whether instant solutions are more popular to discuss today than are the nuances of what really will accomplish change in a way that is desirable. One person made reference to laws on controlled substances that are now beginning to be seen as having placed too much emphasis on unnecessary incarceration.

Need for courageous—if imperfect—proposals— It's not essential that every proposal have been thoroughly reviewed in advance of publication to reveal its weaknesses as well as strengths, a member said. We need more individuals and groups willing to step out and suggest something different. Sometimes a less-than-perfect idea will stimulate someone else to go one better.

Elements of good proposals in the past —We ought not forget, a member said, that outstanding examples of public-policy proposals in the past often have been the result of a willingness to spend considerable time learning about the problem or opportunity, understanding its complexity, reviewing possible solutions and trying to come up with something really creative.

Look maybe to an entirely new model —Rather than limiting ourselves to recommendations addressed to existing entities, such as foundations, one person suggested that perhaps we ought to think about coming up with an entirely new model, different from anything in existence today.

Is the lack of a sense of community behind much of our difficulty?— Noting that big changes are continuing to occur by age group and other demographics in the state, a member wondered whether people have a reduced sense of community today than in the past. If so, the member suggested, perhaps finding a recommendation to re-invigorate a sense of community would help the public-policy process more than anything else.

Importance of our report giving good examples of critical issues needing attention— We agreed that our report will need to be explicit about issues we consider of high importance. A preliminary list that was prepared for today's meeting resulted in considerable discussion and controversy. One person advocated that several other issues be on the list, including corrections, transportation, all levels of post-high school education, strengthening family, and income disparity.