



Civic Caucus Interview Group

Discussion

Your ideas are needed, and welcome, on improving the public policy process in Minnesota

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

August 12, 2016

The Civic Caucus interview group today looked ahead to ideas that might be included in a report on generating innovative public policy proposals. Among suggestions: Keep in mind that much of Minnesota's quality of life has been maintained as a result of creative public policy decisions. Maintain a list of major unresolved public policy issues. Make study groups more representative of the population. Make the assignment, or the charge, as precise as possible. Don't assume everyone already knows what the problem is; learn first. Resist the temptation to seek quick answers. If it's a state-local issue, keep the proposals at the state-local level; resist the temptation to turn to the federal government for answers.

Addressing how to finance a proposal is essential; don't leave such questions for someone else. Recognize the potential of new ideas in unblocking contentious gridlock. Acknowledge that new ideas, even if not perfect, are better than none at all; ideas from one source will stimulate more ideas from other sources. Don't let advocacy groups dominate the process; disinterested persons—as distinguished from uninterested persons—are urgently needed. Recognize that often problems need to be redefined before they can be solved. Look for a central message, not just a laundry list of proposed changes.

Introductions

We introduced two guests today, Wayne Jennings and Charles Lutz, the two individuals who have responded with comments to more Civic Caucus interviews over the years than anyone else. We invited them to assist the Civic Caucus interview group in today's discussion on public policy.

Preliminary outline of forthcoming report —We were reminded of the preliminary outline that we're using for the format of a report we intend to complete before the end of the calendar year:

1. Looking ahead at...

—Opportunities before they are lost,

—Challenges and problems before they become crises,

in order to create...

— **A climate of opinion** that will generate actionable proposals from our community and its governmental system.

2. Looking back and forward at...

—How opportunities and problems were handled in the past.

—What the state needs to do for the future.

3. Actionable proposals

—Where they have originated in the past

—Where they need to come from now and in the future

—Characteristics of sound, actionable proposals?

4. In general what needs to be done for Minnesota to continue to be a state that works

Today's agenda: Our discussion today focused on several problems in the public policy process that have mentioned in our interviews:

* Far too many urgent problems not being addressed

* Seeming demand for quick answers versus systematic analysis

* Insufficient learning and analysis where problems aren't well defined and need re-shaping

* Too much emphasis on federal solutions, not state-local

* Absence of specific, action-ready proposals in reports from well-meaning groups

* Process dominated by advocacy groups, as against general purpose groups

* Foundations, businesses increasingly reluctant to provide general support

* Too many groups not demographically representative of the population (e.g. age, income, birth location)

* Major print and electronic media less interested in covering public policy studies

Discussion

* **Make the assignment, or the charge, as precise as possible** —When an inquiry into a public policy issue begins, it is critical, an interviewer said, that the assignment, or charge, be as precise as possible. If a description is too vague, or too broad, there's a risk that the task will consume endless hours and result could be just as vague as the assignment.

* **Immigration is a local, not just federal, question** —Responding to a statement that more attention needs to be given to state and local issues, a participant reminded the group that immigration takes on a distinctly local flavor when the question is faced of how best to help immigrants be integrated into the local culture and incorporated into public life. The participant highlighted the example of a Somali immigrant woman who unseated a veteran Minnesota legislator this past week in a primary election. The participant recommended that the Civic Caucus might interview someone with the local [African Development Center](#) .

* **Federal mandates without financing** —A participant said the immigration question is an illustration of federal requirements being imposed but without being accompanied by financing. The federal government determines who may enter and remain in the United States with states and localities left with whatever extra expenses, such as education and health care. Another example is that of special education, where the federal government stipulates the requirements and leaves the states with responsibility for financing.

* **Be careful how many issues you take on** —A participant advised the Civic Caucus to be cautious about the size of its agenda, to make sure we don't spread ourselves too thin.

* **A responsibility to address revenue-spending questions** —The discussion of financing led one participant to highlight a shortcoming that often is present in public policy studies. Well-meaning groups will make proposals that clearly will require tough decisions on revenue and spending to be made by someone—usually the Legislature—but such groups don't bother to discuss how their proposals can be financed. That leaves a serious gap, the interviewer said, and often can help explain why some proposals are extensively modified or maybe not enacted at all. A responsible public policy study needs to be as explicit as possible on how financing could be arranged, or, at the very least, an admission could be made that financing was not addressed.


* **Difficulty in raising funds for public policy analysis needs to be recognized**— Various persons at different times brought up the question of where contributions or other funding will come from to pay for the process of public policy education, study and analysis and making proposals. It's difficult to find funders that offer general support, as against financing for specific inquiries. Foundations clearly are an asset in that they are independent and don't necessarily have philosophical, political or occupational reasons that would infringe on an applicant's freedom. Nevertheless, it's possible, members noted, that foundations are more inclined to support direct service as against policy studies. Foundations know they must exercise care to retain their tax-exempt status, which could work against their supporting studies that might produce specific, actionable proposals that could be interpreted as political.

* **Making study groups more representative of the population**— The group acknowledged the importance today of going out of the way to make sure that studies include various age, ethnic, social, and economic groupings. The group also recognized that it's not just balance of people sitting around

the table. In some situations it might be equally important, or more so, for there to be balance in diversity among individuals and organizations invited to provide input to a study group. Most important is whether the ultimate recommendations from a study, irrespective of the makeup of participants, take into account impact on various populations. Persons felt we shouldn't jump to conclusions that people working on public policy questions are looking chiefly at their own private interest as against that of the public interest.

* **Are people feeling lonely without a feeling of responsibility to the larger community?** —Noting the popularity of individuals pursuing their own interests on the internet and with video games, a participant asked whether people today are more lonely than the past and lack sufficient identification with the communities of which they are a part. Native Americans, a member said, always have had a strong identity with their local communities, something which transplanted Europeans in the 19th century misunderstood.

* **Hailing exceptional work in the media** —It might be popular to criticize print and electronic media for coverage that too often seems to highlight more of the politics than the substance of public policy questions. But, members noted, we should not overlook the very substantial work in subjects such as mental health, child abuse and other social questions that have been featured in the Star Tribune.


* **Keep in mind the fact that over the last 50-60 years Minnesotans have developed a strong reputation for good ideas to strengthen quality of life in the state** —We were reminded of comments by Ted Kolderie, in his widely-circulated paper  **Cold Sunbelt**, that noted that Minnesota has strengthened its position as a leader among states by its creative problem-solving in public policy. Maintaining such leadership calls for people to look critically at how well the people of the state are doing today and will be doing in the future.

* **Welcoming everyone** —A participant drew attention to the St. Paul Interfaith Network, which is devoting high priority to helping Muslims be fully integrated into Minnesota. Another participant recalled that in the 1930s Minnesota was not so welcoming; moreover, it was known for being anti-Semitic.

* **Need to recognize forgotten populations outside the immigrant community** —We ought to remember, a participant said, that significant problems, including poverty in suburban areas, are present among long-standing residents of the state, not only among immigrants. This comment led someone else to note the dislocating impact on jobs that accompany changes in various segments of the economy.

* **Remember the two-part inquiry**— We should keep in mind, a participant cautioned, that the Civic Caucus has two related, but separable, inquiries going on. One concerns the process of public policy in Minnesota. The other concerns the future of the Civic Caucus, specifically. We expect the inquiry into public policy in Minnesota to be completed later this year, in advance of the inquiry about the Civic Caucus.

* **Reminding ourselves of the importance of a specific charge, or assignment, in a public policy study** —A participant recalled that the Citizens League has worked very hard to develop specific

assignments for its study committees. For example, the  **Citizens League committee** that in 1988 recommended chartering for public schools, had received a four-paragraph charge from the Citizens League Board of Directors. The final paragraph:

"The central question for the committee is: Should the delivery of education be reorganized so that all students have access to the highest possible quality programs? The committee will also consider: What changes should be made in the charter of school districts, if they are to remain as the principal "teaching" organizations? What different roles are suggested for boards? For administrators? For teachers? How are effectiveness and adaptivity affected by maintaining present boundaries between districts? How does the distribution of students, for purposes of desegregation, impact helping all students reach their highest potential?"


* **Maintaining a list of major unresolved public policy issues** —A participant said it would be helpful for an ongoing list of major unresolved public policy issues could be prepared for Minnesota. Such a list could serve as a guide for almost any group planning informational programs or policy studies.

* **Looking for new, better solutions for resolving differences among competing groups**— A participant said so many issues today seem to be characterized as "transactional", that is, contending forces each trying to advance their own interest, with a decision that might ultimately reached to balance the variety of individual interests. Where, participant asked, is the public interest advanced?

* **Reminding ourselves of the preamble to the Minnesota constitution** —A participant read the preamble to Minnesota's constitution: *" We, the people of the state of Minnesota, grateful to God for our civil and religious liberty, and desiring to perpetuate its blessings and secure the same to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution."*

* **The advantage of specific proposals, even when imperfect** —A participant said that progress in finding good solutions almost always occurs when specific proposals are offered to complex problems. It's not so critical, the participant said, that the proposals are enacted as presented. They serve to draw greater attention to the problem. They prompt others to think about solutions that might be better. They promote more positive discussion about what ought to be done, as contrasted with complaining about the current situation. Too many groups fail to sense the importance of making specific, action-ready proposals, the participant said.

These comments led another participant to highlight the need for groups making proposals to include how proposals, if enacted, might be financed. Most often, the participant said, unresolved financing questions are the major obstacles to gaining approval of creative ideas.

* **Finding an overall recommendation?** —Near the end of the meeting the group discussed briefly whether there are options for an overarching proposal that could address the various concerns about developing good public policy. Is there a model we could suggest, such as the  **guiding principles** in the Citizens League outlined in 1976?

* **Greater use of social media?** —We returned briefly to a discussion of possible changes in the Civic Caucus, including its use of social media, which currently is limited to referencing its interviews on Twitter.

* **Our upcoming schedule** —We reviewed our timetable, which calls for a preliminary draft of the report on the public policy process to be ready by early September, with the hope that the report can be approved for seeking signatures of support from Civic Caucus email recipients by November, with publication in early December.