October 17, 2016

Civic Caucus draft report on public policy in Minnesota
When completed, we'll have these sections:

Summary: A draft of which appears here.
Introduction: A draft of which appears here.
Definition of public policy: A draft of which appears here.
Objectives of this report: A draft of which appears here.
Background, or The public-policy process in Minnesota in the past: A a draft of which appears here.
Findings and Conclusions, or the process today: A draft of which appears here.
Recommendations, **the future process**: A draft of which appears here.
Discussion of Recommendations: yet to be prepared.
The Civic Caucus: What we are; history; yet to be prepared.
Signatures of Support: We'll seek signatures from everyone on our email list.
Persons interviewed: We'll list the names of persons interviewed since we started this project last September.

SUMMARY

Commitment to enhancing the quality of life in Minnesota has a long history. It was present among the state's indigenous Native Americans in preserving the natural environment. It was present among New Englanders settling in Minnesota in the mid-19th century, bringing their Yankee culture of civic engagement with them. That commitment remains strong today. It is demonstrated by the importance of education at all levels; respect for history, music and the arts; protection of natural resources; a well-trained work force; leadership by businesses of all sizes, including both small and Fortune 500 companies; respected news and information coverage; voting; civic and political activity; strong institutions of government and cooperation among individuals and groups.

The commitment still is evident today, even as unprecedented challenges have emerged. Major shifts in ethnic, racial and age make-up of the population. Dramatic differences in educational attainment and incomes. New jobs opening, old ones declining. Some regions growing faster than others. Revolutionary change in how information and knowledge is generated and shared. Declining relevance of community organizations that formerly brought people together. And, yes, Minnesota still faces an enormous challenge in assuring quality of life for descendants of those who were here first: the current Native American population.

A significant, perhaps sometimes overlooked, element in sustaining the state's quality of life—and the main subject of this report—has been how people and organizations in the state go about identifying community issues early; learning about them; rethinking them; looking for underlying causes, not just obvious symptoms; analyzing and debating; and coming up with well-reasoned proposals for action—all of what we identify as the "Minnesota Process." This report recommends how to further strengthen that process.

Following this report, the Civic Caucus will pursue in greater depth at least two areas of ongoing concern: (a) what kinds of arrangements for analyzing issues and developing proposals are needed in today's changed environment of communication, changed attitudes about participation in organizations, and vastly different makeup of the population, and (b) how proposals are considered and acted upon by the Legislature and other governing bodies.

Just a glance at unfinished business illustrates that Minnesota faces immense challenges now and in coming years. Pick any issue: distributing state dollars among local governments, fixing under-performing schools, matching available jobs with trained workers, preserving natural resources, funding transportation, and on and on. We must find the best ways possible to meet these challenges. The state has significant natural assets, but lacks some, such as climate, that some other states have used to help move toward a more optimistic social, economic and political future. As in the past, Minnesota's future will depend on its creativity in public policy.

Creativity doesn't emerge automatically. It's all part of hard work—learning how things work, defining and redefining a problem, addressing causes and not symptoms, listening carefully to knowledgeable people, gathering and analyzing data, seeking input and sharing information widely, challenging conventional wisdom, and understanding current incentives and how they might be changed. It's a nonpartisan, civil approach, without rancor or political rhetoric. It takes time. Cutting corners by saying, "We all know what the problem is" rarely works. Nor is it productive to put advocacy groups in a room and let them duke it out.

The state's charitable foundations should make improving the quality of proposals for public-policy change a high priority. The foundations of Minnesota—community, corporate, family and private foundations—already are leaders in public policy. They possess essential characteristics of being inherently dedicated to the health of Minnesota and its citizens, being unaffiliated with interest groups, being nonpartisan, and, very important, having financial resources. We urge the foundations to make a commitment to support narrowly targeted public-policy studies that will probe deeply for underlying causes, not automatically accepting obvious symptoms, that will be open to redefining issues and that will offer action-specific proposed solutions.

To act on this high priority, we recommend that the foundation community enable the following tasks, which are not overly complicated:

- Prepare and widely distribute ongoing, narrowly defined descriptions of the 25 to 50 most critical public-policy issues that need to be addressed in the state—Minnesota issues only, not national or international issues.

- Identify a small group of issues of highest priority, including those that are about to emerge, but aren't necessarily already widely discussed in popular media.

- Encourage individual foundations to invite applications for study of those issues, and to recommend innovative ways to address them.

- Give preference to applicants who illustrate that new kinds of organizations, utilizing new kinds of methods, will be needed to accommodate dramatic changes in Minnesota's demographics and communications and how people come together to make decisions.

- Avoid assignments that are too general. Relate the assignments to precise concerns. If the area of inquiry is education of youth, an example could be to look specifically at the performance of alternative schools for students with behavioral problems.

- Require recipients to follow well-established principles of the Minnesota Process outlined in this report in learning about, shaping and analyzing issues, and in developing creative, action-ready proposals.
- Measure and report the following results: (a) how well completed studies followed the principles and (b) the ultimate outcomes from reports, in terms of implementation of recommendations.

- Give special recognition to completed studies that are exemplary in following the principles, stimulate widespread community discussion and produce concrete results.

We recommend that the foundation community create or enable a special entity to carry out these functions. Actual studies would take place outside the foundations, not within the foundations or within this new entity. One foundation or even one individual could take responsibility to establish such an entity on its own. Or several foundations could work cooperatively. A catalyst might be needed to get discussion going within the foundation community. We recommend that one or more of the larger foundations with respected public-policy experience serve as a catalyst by arranging a meeting of foundation leaders to review and act on recommendations in this report.

DEFINITION OF PUBLIC POLICY

We find it beneficial to distinguish between *public-policy design* and *public-policy action*.

* **Public-Policy 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.

* **Public-Policy 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.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS REPORT

The Civic Caucus had the following objectives in mind when it drafted this report:

- 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 developing 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 policymaking in Minnesota today.

- To recommend specific actions to improve the state's public-policy process to have a positive impact on the quality of life of all Minnesotans.

INTRODUCTION

(In this section the Civic Caucus highlights definitions of public policy in the community sector.)

A humorous TV ad shows a dentist informing a patient that some cavities have been discovered, with the dentist claiming to be responsible only for identifying the problem. The astounded patient is told go elsewhere to fix the cavities.

A diagnosis or partial diagnosis without a prescription? Not acceptable. Nor the opposite, a prescription without a diagnosis. Nor a misdiagnosis. Nor a bad prescription. Nor, obviously, receiving, but neglecting to implement, a valid prescription.

When it comes to public policy in Minnesota, which is our topic, the TV ad's simple message still applies, but in a much different context. Public policy covers a multitude of areas, including education, health care, housing, job-seeking and development, public safety, public assistance, taxes, and transportation, all at the federal, state and local levels. It's mainly the discussion before the vote is taken. Never-ending problems demand attention (diagnosis), sometimes accompanied by recommendations for fixing the problems (prescription) and sometimes without. And in public policy sometimes a lesser-quality choice is adopted and a better approach is passed up. On some occasions, great results emerge.

Thankfully, the state has an abundance of diagnosis and prescription in public policy. A significant part of Minnesota's quality of life can be traced to identifying opportunities and problems early, learning all about them, redefining the opportunities and problems, subjecting them to intensive analysis, evaluating options for solutions, recommending a preferred option, and, finally, gaining action by decision-makers, such as the Legislature.

The state is fortunate to have a broad and deep assortment of highly competent organizations, including—but clearly not limited to—radio and television, college and university entities specializing in public affairs, community foundations covering all regions of the state, news and editorial leadership from daily papers statewide, think tanks and civic organizations of all interests and shades. These groups might be lumped into a category and be identified as a "community sector," with the first sector being the elected officials and their staffs and the second sector, the units of implementation, including state agencies and local units of government.

A key strength in Minnesota's process has been that ultimately, informal, ad hoc partnerships have developed in connection with each major public-policy decision, including an assortment of those from the community sector, including business and labor, and including advocacy groups, elected officials, staffs and government agencies.

Anyone and everyone is involved in public policy one way or another. It can be a comment on a topic in controversy via letters to the editor, instant surveys on electronic media, public opinion polls, voting on a referendum, reading or listening to learn about an issue, protests and rallies. Or attending a meeting or seminar. Or contributing to disaster victims. Expressing dismay over an event or the implications of Census data. The list is endless.

And, of course, people line up on all sides of an issue.

A major opportunity or problem might not be fully, or easily, understood. Lots of learning can be essential. The problem needs to be shaped, and maybe redefined, requiring extensive analysis. Truth needs to be separated from fiction. Different possible responses need to be evaluated. Implications of a preferred option need to be evaluated: Does it seek the public good? Does it look at various interests and populations? And who benefits and who loses?

When an opportunity isn't captured or an issue doesn't get resolved, it's popular to blame the political process or its leaders. This report, while not giving our leaders a pass, focuses more on what happens outside, before and even without, legislative debate and decision. At critical times, with a seemingly intractable impasse among contending parties, what really might be needed could be a creative new idea from the outside.

We'll now review what happened in Minnesota's past, what's happening today and suggest what should happen tomorrow.

BACKGROUND:

THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS IN THE PAST

(In this section, the Civic Caucus highlights the "Minnesota Process," those major principles that have defined public-policy leadership in Minnesota over the last 50 years.)

It would require massive resources to take a comprehensive inventory of creative actions affecting Minnesota that have been made by the almost-countless groups, formal and informal, volunteer and staff, in Minnesota's community sector. But a look at the Citizens League, founded in 1952, and still operating today, can help illustrate that contribution. Its website contains a complete inventory of all its reports to the present day.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Citizens League recommendations were adopted in several areas of city-county relationships, education, government structure, metropolitan affairs, and state and metropolitan tax policy. As a consequence, many other states became interested in how the Citizens League functioned. The *National Civic Review* published a report on the Citizens League. A national conference on the Citizens League took place in the Twin Cities area. In 1976, the Citizens League published a 21-page manual, "The Citizens League Itself," to help others locally and nationally learn more about its process, which has been utilized in other contexts and now could be called the Minnesota Process.

Major points in the Minnesota Process remain central today:

1. It is critically important to help a state understand what its problems are and what ought to be done about them.

2. The job is to look ahead at problems before they become crises and at opportunities before they are lost and to create a climate of opinion in which the community and its governmental system will respond.

3. First, people must educate themselves about the problem before starting to talk about solutions.

4. This process should result in an imaginative, realistic, innovative, specific proposal or recommendation, not vague desires for change.

5. A broad range of organizations and individuals, public and private, must concur in the problem and its solution if action is to result.

Key features of the Minnesota Process, as outlined in 1976, are as follows:

- **Nongovernmental, independent, nonpartisan, non-special interest, citizen-based.** An independent group, not part of government or other groups or organizations locally or nationally, has an advantage. It is strictly nonpartisan in its leadership, membership and activities and welcomes people of all political persuasions and interests. It urges individuals to participate as generalists representing themselves, as distinct from a political party, profession or interest group. While not ignoring the exceptional contribution that people with professional or occupational credentials can offer as resources in the internal exploration of an issue, the credentials and perspective of ordinary citizens are equal or greater.

- **General purpose, Minnesota-focused.** Take a broad view of opportunities and problems and don't be restricted to any one subject area. Focus on state and local issues in Minnesota. Recommendations can occasionally involve the national government, but only as they affect or are related to a state or local issue.

- **Professional staffing, but not targeted expertise**. Professional staff with organizational, writing and investigative skills is essential, but a particular staff member shouldn't necessarily be assigned to a committee because of that person's expertise in a certain field. That would make the committee defer to staff. The committee, its chair and its staff learn together. Many organizations without paid or professional staff make significant contributions to public-policy proposals.

- **Appoint chairs who are more than moderators.** Select chairs for committees who are articulate, able to manage group discussion, are willing to learn and who are able to speak for the final product of the committee to the community and public agencies or policy bodies.

- **Set priorities.** The list of urgent public-policy problems in Minnesota will always be much longer than any group can ever undertake. Place the emphasis where the need is greatest—consistent with the group's own abilities. Moreover, certain subjects, for example, those with some prospect of being settled by fact and reason, are better suited for learning and analysis than are subjects where emotion and dogmatism rule the day. Assemble a large list of possibilities from which groups can make their selection. Sometimes a topic might not be regarded in the larger community as being the most critical, but a group is free to select the topic for other legitimate reasons.

- **Make the assignment as specific as possible.** Craft the assignment, or the charge to the committee, to address a specific, often limited, concern. Such action reduces the likelihood that a committee, after a few weeks of learning, will find itself uncertain about direction or feel overwhelmed. As helpful as a specific assignment can be, it's not easy to fulfill, because the temptation always is to be "comprehensive," to look at the "big

picture." A specific assignment is more likely to yield a specific, actionable proposal. A vague assignment often produces a vague proposal that is not actionable. Further, some problems are so complex that it is futile to look at more than a portion.

- **Learn first: education and information are key**. It's not uncommon for groups addressing knotty questions of public policy to skip the learning process and move immediately to discussing recommendations. Perhaps more often than not, people will say: "Let's not waste time. We know what the problem is. Let's get on with the solution." That's not the approach to take. People will come to a study with a variety of knowledge and possibly opinions about a subject. Those who think they know everything are required to cool their heels while everyone else learns about the issue. Insist that information be gathered first, that knowledgeable individuals be invited to share their contending views and be questioned themselves.

- **Capitalize on the value of the generalist.** It's not unusual for the generalist participants, who have had no advanced specialized knowledge on a subject, to offer the essential outside perspective that enables a new, compelling approach to be taken to a problem, something that "experts" never would have considered. It's hard to get the public to focus on what is building up and will become a truly big problem down the road. For example, climate change has been recognized for years as truly important, but even today many remained unconvinced, building sea-level houses on coastal Florida.

- **Search for what is fundamental**. It's an advantage to be unaligned with any advocacy group and, therefore, not required to accept the parameters of popular debate on a current issue. Be free to ask basic questions, to get to the root of a problem. If the debate is over symptoms, what are the real causes? Might incentives be changed so that, for example, some individual or group acting in their own self-interest will actually further the public interest?

- **Think ahead.** Utilize independence and freedom to think ahead, even to vision, about long-range implications of current actions. Don't be constrained by two-year budget cycles that always demand immediate attention and interfere with looking at a bigger picture. The fiscal implications of long-term visions, their expenses and beneficiaries, also need to be estimated and identified.

- **Listen to all sides.** Membership on a given study group usually isn't representative of the larger population. Nor on any given study will it be possible to include representatives of all groups with legitimate interests. For example, despite using vigorous recruitment efforts, how can a study on education possibly include representatives of students, parents, teachers, a balance of workers and employers, age groups, income levels, geographic locations, and various ethnic groups?.Try to attract participants of various backgrounds without worrying about perfect balance. It is very common that a greater problem in committee membership is with persons affiliated with advocacy groups that are trying to protect or advance a certain point of view. Such groups must be respected and listened to for the valuable background and insight they offer. Thus, the challenge is to allow them to be involved in that way, but not be able to exert excess influence by actually being members of the study group. Again, here's where a good interview process is invaluable, by giving advocacy groups the fullest opportunity to provide input, but not undue influence over the result.

- **Resist temptation to take shortcuts.** Inevitably, many people will be looking for results immediately. But shortcuts won't work. It takes time to understand the current definition of a problem; it takes more time to determine that a given definition might be faulty; analysis takes time; coming up with a good solution takes time. Nevertheless, the process must go on with all deliberate speed, recognizing that undoubtedly there will always be demand for prompt completion.

- **Share what is learned.** There's no need for proprietary control over the information gathered. Share the knowledge that has been gained widely in the larger community, including by use of electronic media, giving others a chance to learn as the committee learns. That can go a long way toward cultivating and adding legitimacy to the field of debate that might well occur when a final report with recommendations is issued. It has been normal for individuals thinking about running for office, whatever their political affiliation, to join study groups to learn more about public issues.

- **Issue informative, readable, defendable final reports**. Final reports should address current issues thoroughly and, via the background information they include, most often in a list of findings of the study group, the reports can have a more timeless quality. Reports will have valuable background that can be helpful years on. They should be written in plain language for the benefit of both persons who are uninformed and persons intimately involved in a subject. They also help journalists needing background on an issue quickly. The best reports also include a set of conclusions that identify direction or the particular insight of the study group, recommendations for action, and discussion of the pros and cons of different solutions and reasoning behind the preferred selection.

- **Provide an internal check on quality.** Study groups benefit from some check on their autonomy. For example, before reports are published they might need to gain approval from a board that evaluates final reports based on whether required processes were followed.

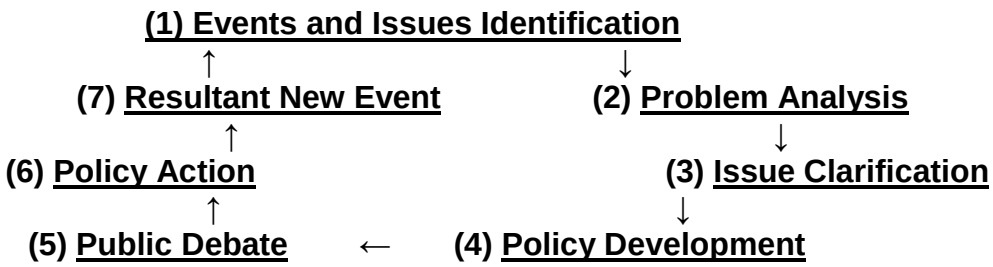
FINDINGS:

THE PUBLIC-POLICY PROCESS TODAY

(In this section, the Civic Caucus highlights the public-policy environment in Minnesota today.)

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has conducted some 38 interviews with various persons involved in one or more aspects of Minnesota public policy. In addition, the Civic Caucus interview group has held some 10 meetings exclusively devoted to internal discussion on what we have learned.

We've found it very helpful to keep a policy cycle developed by former Citizens League Executive Director Ted Kolderie in mind: (1) events occur and issues are identified; (2) problem analysis takes place; (3) issue clarification follows; (4) policy proposals are then developed; (5) public debate occurs; (6) policy action takes place; and (7) the action creates new events that become apparent, starting a new cycle of policy discussion and policymaking.



Our key findings:

1. The environment for public-policy discussion has changed. Public-policy organizations are challenged today by demographic shifts, including newer ethnic and cultural groups making up an ever-larger share of the population, new generations of young people with new attitudes, persistent income shortfall for many people, more single-parent families and varying understanding of public policymaking.

A huge growth in programs, especially at the federal level, has occurred, along with lobbying by various interest groups, including units of state and local government.

Funding sources for public policy have shifted dramatically: less general-purpose funding; more funding directed at specific studies; major corporations, formerly owned locally, now multi-national corporations, with less interest in focusing on Minnesota; significant growth in foundations, who place more focus on funding direct social service than on funding public-policy studies.

How people get their information about public-policy issues is profoundly different today. The print version of the daily newspaper formerly served as an agenda-setter, as well as the major source of information. Appearance on the front page meant a certain issue was really important. As circulation has dropped and as more and more people get their news online, top news today is determined by what people *want* to read, not necessarily what an editor thinks they *should* read.

2. Civics isn't the highest priority course in school. An essay for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences identifies five challenges: (1) It is not a state or federal priority to ensure that the quality of civics education is high; (2) social studies textbooks do not facilitate the development of needed civic skills; (3) upper-income students are better served by our schools than are lower-income students; (4) cutbacks in funds available to schools make implementing improvements in civics education difficult; and (5) reform efforts are complicated by the fact that civics education has become a pawn in a polarized debate among partisans.

3. Statistics on voter turnout are nothing to brag about. While Minnesota ranks consistently high among states in voter turnout, its own statistics aren't all that great, particularly in non-presidential elections. For example, barely 50.5 percent of eligible Minnesota voters cast ballots in the 2014 elections.

4. Nevertheless, public-policy activity never has been greater. Think of the serious discussions every day on the print and online editions of weekly papers around the state, Minnesota Public Radio, Fluence Media, Bring Me The News, the weekly *Almanac* program on Twin Cities Public Television (TPT), the major newspapers' features on key issues, the public

affairs specialization by *MinnPos*t, the opinions on the editorial pages, the constant give-and-take in social media, the blogs and so on.

And there has been a proliferation of public-policy organizations over the years, including Growth & Justice, Center of the American Experiment, Itasca Project, Jefferson Center, Center for Policy Design, MSPWin, Wilder Research and Compass, Minnesota Center for Fiscal Excellence, Voices for Racial Justice, the longstanding Citizens League and League of Women Voters and, of course, the Civic Caucus. However, the sheer magnitude of advocacy groups and their lobbyists on every conceivable issue virtually dwarfs the efforts of these organizations.

There is frequent use of "summits" (formerly known as conferences), where various leaders are called together to highlight knotty issues. Fees can prevent some people from attending. For those unable to attend these meetings, access to summaries of such meetings and their dialogues often is limited.

Ad hoc protest groups emerge constantly to focus on the most persistent, and difficult, public-policy questions of the day, such as jobs, housing, income, health, treatment of various ethnic groups and so forth.

5. Minnesota has respected scholarly enterprises dedicated to the study of public policy. The Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota doesn't stand alone. example, There are also Hamline University's Master's and Doctorate of Public Administration programs, St. John's University's McCarthy Center for Public Policy and Civic Engagement, the University of Minnesota-Duluth's Center for Ethics and Public Policy, St. Olaf College's Institute for Freedom and Community, the University of St. Thomas's Public Policy and Leadership program, and undoubtedly more.

6. The list of subjects that need inquiry, analysis and proposals is long. To illustrate the kinds of public-policy inquiries needed in Minnesota, here are some examples shared with the Civic Caucus in its interviews.

- Address racial disparities across the board, including education, employment and income.
- Determine how to assure a greater economic future for Minnesota that emphasizes the importance of economic development, growth and technology, and involves broad coalitions in the nongovernmental and governmental sectors.
- Craft innovative proposals to help lawmakers reach agreement on budget and finance.
- Match job skill sets available to qualified, or under-qualified, job seekers and communicate the skills that are needed to the educational institutions able to provide the needed training.
- Review, understand and attack causes of poverty-level incomes.
- Understand the root cause and remove educational achievement gaps among various groups.

- Make postsecondary education more relevant, affordable, and accessible.
- Link high schools and postsecondary education with their communities and with employers.
- Review compensation for legislators to broaden the pool of potential candidates.
- Improve mental health services to school-aged youth.
- Improve training practices among police forces working in diverse communities.
- Sort out nongovernmental and governmental roles in economic development.
- Integrate immigrants into the state's social and economic life.
- Improve the process of identifying, endorsing, nominating and selecting the state's elected and appointed officials.
- Attract new residents to the state; discourage exodus.
- Help workers travel from home to work and back in a reasonable time.
- Change approaches to incarceration.
- Protect the state's natural resources.
- Plan for and adjust to climate change.
- Examine movements of tax dollars among different levels of government with resultant effects and limitations.
- Determine the influence of federal and state funding of state and local services.

7. Major concerns have emerged from Civic Caucus interviews:

- People in different demographic groups and age segments participate in new and different ways today. Special focus is needed on how people of all groups obtain, process, and utilize information (data presented in some context), and knowledge (making sense out of information). Effective policy flows form reliable knowledge.
- Even though no comprehensive review of all policy reports throughout the state has been conducted, it seems clear that the state has fewer such reports today than in the years when the Citizens League was issuing reports much more regularly.
- Much of Minnesota's quality of life has been maintained as a result of creative public-policy decisions.
- No public, ongoing inventory of major unresolved issues facing the state is readily available.

- Study groups appear less and less representative of the population as the state's demographic nature continues to change.

- Few study committees are given specific, targeted assignments.

- There is a widespread tendency of study groups to make overly optimistic assumptions about the advance knowledge of participants, so the groups tend to underestimate the amount of study required.

- Studies appear to have great urgency attached to them, with the likelihood that quick answers will be sought.

- The attraction of nationalizing issues seems to take precedence over keeping the focus on state and local issues, which often are deemed to be less important.

- Proposals often are made ignoring their financial implications, despite the fact that the financial questions and levels of spending/taxes often are a major cause of deadlock by policymakers. It also might be true that a focus on financial constraints illustrates an absence of consensus on the underlying problem being addressed.

- Organizations often are reluctant to make proposals too specific, feeling they don't know enough or even fearing they'll be subject to too much criticism

- Advocacy groups seem to be far more energized and involved than general-purpose, non-special interest, nonpartisan groups.

- The statement of the problem often is accepted as defined by the contending parties, without an effort to ask whether there might be a more significant underlying problem.

- Long lists of recommendations often are made without indication as to which merit highest priority, leaving policymakers wondering about a central message.

- Massive new changes in media need to be viewed as opportunities for everyone to utilize in building effective public policy.

8. Commitment to issues unique to Minnesota is not as clear. There's no question that academic institutions pay attention to national and international issues. It's not so evident that Minnesota issues receive sufficient attention in the research and studies by faculty and by students in advanced degree programs in the state. As the world has become interconnected to a much greater extent than 50 or 60 years ago, it becomes harder to distinguish distinctly Minnesota issues or uniquely Twin Cities regional issues.

9. Political parties in Minnesota have changed. In years past it wasn't unusual for political parties in Minnesota to sponsor task forces of their members to look in-depth at issues before developing resolutions of support. Clearly, the parties are every bit as involved in substance today, but positions seem to be taken more by quick votes on resolutions at caucuses and conventions, where views of organized special interests can, and usually do, easily prevail.

10. Ironically, newer technologies for communicating information aren't always utilized. Countless public meetings and conferences occur where public policy is discussed, usually led by a knowledgeable speaker. But the beneficiaries of learning from such gatherings frequently don't extend beyond fee-paying attendees. Major media cover fewer speeches today, and few organizations take steps to inform non-attendees by sharing summaries of meetings inexpensively, broadly, and quickly, via social media or other electronic means.

11. There is great concern evident over polarization and legislative impasse. The Civic Caucus undertook its review of the public-policy process in light of growing polarization and impasse in legislative bodies. It decided to concentrate on a lesser-mentioned possible reason, whether outside groups might be able to develop the more creative, breakthrough ideas so essential to breaking legislative deadlocks. That's been the main inquiry of the Civic Caucus to date. Nevertheless, the Civic Caucus interviews have revealed deep concern with failure of legislative bodies to act on urgent public problems, regardless of how innovative a solution might be. Many potentially fruitful areas of correction have been mentioned:

- Holding more public hearings that seek participation by general citizens.
- Reducing the extent to which entirely different subjects are thrown together in omnibus bills.
- Bringing openness and accountability to campaign finance.
- Making it easier for elected officials of different parties to get to know one another and work more closely together.
- Making it more difficult for legislative committees to be the captives of advocacy groups.
- Giving office-seekers the incentive to appeal to a broader constituency.
- Reducing the number of "safe" districts, that is, districts dominated by voters of one political party.

CONCLUSIONS:

THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS TODAY

(In this section the Civic Caucus states its conclusions, that is, value judgments, on strengths and challenges of the public-policy process in Minnesota today.)

1. Enlightened public-policy discussion never has been more important, particularly in light of so much poisoned political rhetoric today. The community sector need not be preoccupied by the paralysis and downright demagogy that afflict so much political discussion today. And it's not just inflamed rhetoric. It's playing with the truth. Unfortunately, too often individuals and organizations are saddled with the same afflictions. Those outside the direct political fray and 24-hour-a-day online chats and blogs need to continually hold themselves to far higher standards.

2. Public-policy leadership is a key to Minnesota's high national ranking. In part because of its leadership on public policy, Minnesota has become the great state it is, despite its location far from more climate-friendly and economically attractive states on the East and West coasts and the South.

3. But the state's position is threatened if the community sector doesn't do better. Elected officials in Minnesota urgently need the best, most creative, public-policy ideas that can be crafted if this state is to maintain its position. Some of those ideas certainly will come from the officials themselves, their administrative agencies and advocacy groups closest to those agencies.

But what Minnesota needs most are proposals that emerge from serious, nonpartisan, non-special interest, information-based, thorough analysis of current and long-range opportunities and problems, led by concerned citizens, supported by quality professionals. This has been Minnesota's strength, but a renewed commitment is urgently needed.

Creative ideas are no guarantee of better public-policy performance. But creative ideas are essential if our lawmakers are to do better. Moreover, it does little to benefit the state for outsiders to continually complain about legislative performance. We should roll up our sleeves and challenge ourselves and elected officials with the best proposals that can be crafted. And, yes, it's essential to overcome legislative polarization.

4. Lawmakers are better equipped to respond than to propose. Some people mistakenly think that coming up with proposals is government's job, not theirs. More often than not, legislators are understandably reluctant to become advocates for new ideas. Legislators must gain support from voters to stay in office and many voters aren't receptive to what otherwise might be deemed creative proposals. The Legislature itself, with its committee organization, is structured much better for review of others' ideas than coming up with its own.

5. Advocacy groups and government agencies ought not be the only source either. Individuals and groups with a vital personal or occupational interest in and intimate knowledge of a given governmental function can be expected to offer their share of ideas. But that interest, often very important, ought not be regarded as the only public interest.

6. Keep public-policy discussions on the merits, not the politics. A good way to assure civil interchange over difficult public-policy issues is to concentrate on the merits of the issues in question. That's far better than getting into whether this or that individual or group is advocating or opposing a given position or to quickly assess the political merits or feasibility of a proposal. Concentrate on the substance of the issues, not the political positions of individuals involved in the issues. Look more to facts than feelings. One respected sage tries to listen carefully for the knowledge and reasoning behind any position, rather than the more common approach of suspecting an ulterior motive and making a snap judgment.

7. The past is not a sufficient model for public-policy organizations in the future. We should not for a minute think that public-policy organizations can successfully continue to operate as they have. People of different generations possess different perspectives and must be included. So must people of different cultural, ethnic groups and genders, using today's definitions. But it's not just the people. It's how we gain our information today. Millions of us never turn to a print newspaper. It's also how, when and where we learn and discuss. Something entirely new—never contemplated or even imagined by an existing organization—might emerge.

8. Disinterested outsiders are really needed, but are often overlooked and might lack a sense of their own potential. Individuals and groups who have no personal or occupational interest, just desire for the good of the people of the state, must play the major role. They are much more likely to sense longer-term implications, not only the next budgetary cycle. They are likely to be more open to new ideas than are people with preconceived notions of how to solve a given problem.

9. Scholarly enterprise by Minnesota's colleges and universities is key in addressing state and local issues. Almost any recognized opportunity or knotty problem in the state will benefit greatly from thorough research. Our academic institutions are continually producing a flood of reliable, scholarly work from faculty and students. Some, perhaps even all, of these institutions have clear obligations for assuring a high-quality future for the state. Knowing as they do the critical issues facing the state, they should always have a strong portfolio of quality research on these state and local issues. As a check on their own priorities, academic institutions would clearly benefit from knowing what portion of their scholarly work is specifically directed at solving Minnesota issues, as distinct from national and international issues. Such information would help institutions themselves, as well as the general public, evaluate how well they are serving their home state.

10. Minnesota's media that specialize in reporting significant public-policy developments are invaluable, but they could use help. No institutions can lay greater claim to public policy than Minnesota's electronic and print media, the people's first source for information. Furthermore, through major investigations and editorial-opinion pages, the media help enlighten the public to causes and proposals. Efforts still are under way to live up to the words of John Cowles, president of the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, at the dedication of its new offices in May-June 1949:

> *"We are trying to serve the highest common denominator of our readers' interest, not the lowest, and we are constantly trying to raise that common denominator."*

The media are forced to make difficult choices every day about what to cover and what to leave behind. Plenty remains on the cutting room floor, so to speak. Yes, the media could use our help. All sorts of groups sponsor meetings on public issues that the media are unable to cover. Attendees receive the benefit of those meetings, but what of the larger, interested community? One slight extra effort is needed for sponsors of public meetings to go the extra mile, prepare summaries of the main points and circulate the knowledge via social media and other inexpensive means.

11. The community sector needs both (a) organizations that primarily learn, analyze and make proposals and (b) organizations that provide direct service. Providing for direct service, say, a retraining program for underemployed adults, might appear to be more attractive to a donor than a study to determine the best strategies for matching jobs with job seekers. Both approaches are needed. But it's increasingly difficult, particularly for disinterested, general-purpose, nonpartisan organizations engaged in thinking and proposing to receive needed financial support.

12. An ongoing inventory of unresolved public-policy issues in Minnesota is sorely needed. It's unfortunate that many organizations and individuals in Minnesota assert that the most critical problems are obvious and that it's unnecessary to put together any list of issues

needing attention. However, without such a list, setting priorities isn't really possible. Moreover, many groups in public policy, anxious to make some kind of contribution, would be anxious to know where on any list the topics they select might lie. Such an inventory would help scholars, policy-research organizations and the media.

13. Some public-policy questions are important even if nothing nefarious is suspected. Often a good issue arises because certain groups in the population are being harmed, because tax dollars are being squandered or pilfered, or because of some other headline-grabbing development. Sometimes, however, no villain is present. It's just very difficult to know what is the best way, for example, to educate a child, train a worker or organize state government.

14. General expressions of the need for change, while certainly not without some value, usually don't markedly advance the discussion. It's not uncommon for people to decry a situation, possibly citing some oft-repeated data to illustrate how urgent it is for corrective action. Even some thoughtful reports from reputable organizations will call for action, but leave specificity for someone else. *Exactly what needs to be done, by whom and how?* If money is involved, as usually is the case, *how will the proposal be financed?* Those questions are left unanswered way too often. Someone has to come up with an answer.

15. Good information and analysis, not shortcuts, are key to creative proposals. Some persons, perhaps frustrated by other situations where no action was taken, will assert that everyone understands the problem, so all they need to do is to move to action, or "get it done," whatever "it" refers to. But it is the gathering of information and its analysis that provides the necessary fertile ground within which a creative idea can emerge.

16. There is too much work on symptoms, not enough on causes. It's not easy and can take time, but a proposal will be that much stronger when efforts are made to identify the real cause of the problem and to direct proposals toward the cause. In addition to racial discrimination, what other possibilities might help explain disparities in achievement gaps, variations in unemployment and differences in arrest statistics?

17. Seek to understand new proposals before criticizing them. An initial idea is almost always far from perfect and needs to receive intensive analysis. Thus, honest questions, seeking understanding and probing for implications, ought to be the first approach. Unfortunately, the human psyche seems to lead us to criticize first. More good ideas are likely to surface if individuals and groups aren’t so afraid of what others would say.

Moreover, it's very likely that a fledgling idea will stimulate others to come up with something better. A lesser quality idea is much better than no idea at all.

18. Those with courage to propose deserve support from others. More of us ought to appreciate the adage that "there's no end to what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.” For whatever reason, maybe inter-organizational competition, it's not easy for an individual or group making a proposal to be left all alone in its defense. Achieving public policy change is tough, but rallying together around a good idea can help immensely.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS TOMORROW

(In this section, the Civic Caucus offers its specific proposals for action on the public-policy process in Minnesota.)

1. Turn to Minnesota's foundation community for leadership. Our conclusions have demonstrated why Minnesota's community sector is so vital to the public-policy process in this state. Now the question is to whom do we turn for leadership, across the board, with impact on all parties in the community sector. Each entity can be expected to respond on its own, whether an individual organization, media outlet, political party, foundation, think tank, scholarly institution or individual person.

But where can one turn to create incentives for all entities and individuals involved in public policy, acting in their own self-interest, to act simultaneously in the public interest?

We recommend we look first to the foundations. Minnesota's future is closely tied to the work of its highly respected foundations.

- Foundations might be unique in possessing a combination of the essential qualities of independence, freedom, nonpartisanship, revenue base and being absolutely Minnesota-committed.

- They care deeply about and are heavily involved in lives of Minnesotans, as a glance at almost any list of grants would reveal.

- They are indispensable in assuring that Minnesota will find, in years to come, the creative solutions in public policy that are so essential to the state's quality of life. They might be more needed than they realize.

2. We recommend that the following public-policy leadership functions be taken on or at least enabled by Minnesota's foundation community:

- Make a commitment to support narrowly targeted public-policy studies that will probe deeply for underlying causes, not automatically accepting obvious symptoms, that will be open to redefining issues and that will offer action-specific proposed solutions.

- Prepare and widely distribute ongoing, narrowly defined descriptions of the 25 to 50 most critical public-policy issues that need to be addressed in the state. These should be Minnesota issues only, not national or international issues.

- Identify a small group of issues of highest priority, including those that are about to emerge but aren't necessarily already widely discussed in popular media.

- Encourage individual foundations and others to invite applications for study of those issues and to recommend innovative ways to address them.

- Give preference to applicants who illustrate that new kinds of organizations, utilizing new kinds of methods, will be needed to accommodate dramatic changes in Minnesota's demographics, communications and how people come together to make decisions.

- Avoid assignments that are too general. Relate the assignments to very precise concerns. If the area of inquiry is education of youth, an example could be to look specifically at the performance of alternative schools for students with behavioral problems.

- Require recipients to follow well-established principles of the Minnesota Process outlined in this report in learning about, shaping and analyzing issues and in developing creative, action-ready proposals. To accomplish that, we urge that the foundations do the following:

    - Show preference for organizations that are nongovernmental, independent, nonpartisan, citizen-based, general purpose and Minnesota-focused.

    - Focus the assignment, or charge, on a specific, limited concern.

    - Emphasize the importance of undergoing thorough backgrounding in an issue up front.

    - Require that recipients share information broadly with interested parties.

    - Require that recipients listen respectfully to all sides.

    - Require that recipients search for what is fundamental, at the root of a problem.

    - Emphasize the potential of proposals designed to change incentives so that individuals and groups will act in the public interest, even while pursuing private or personal interest.

    - Require that recipients always look for an innovative solution.

    - Stress that final reports must be informative, readable and defendable.

- Measure and report results (a) of how well completed studies follow the principles and (b) ultimate outcomes from reports, in terms of implementation of recommendations.

- Give special recognition to completed studies that are exemplary in following the principles, stimulate widespread community discussion and produce concrete results.

3. We recommend that a special entity to carry out these functions be established within the foundation community or be enabled by foundation initiatives. Actual studies would take place outside the foundations, not within the foundations or within this new entity. One foundation or even one individual could take responsibility to establish such an entity on its own. Or several foundations could work cooperatively. A catalyst will likely be needed to get discussion going within the foundation community. We recommend that one or more of the larger foundations with respected public-policy experience serve as a catalyst by arranging a meeting of foundation leaders to review and act on recommendations in this report.

4. The following should be considered as high-priority broad topics for study.

- Attacking racial disparities across the board, including education, employment, and income.
- Filling job openings in a time of shortage of workers.
- Developing a better economic future for Minnesota.
- Making postsecondary education and job training more relevant, affordable, accessible and cost effective.
- Improving the efficiency and equity of getting from home to work and back in reasonable time for all workers.
- Achieving a more seamless connection between high school and postsecondary education.

The idea of foundations working together on public policy is not new. Six of them—the Bush, Blandin, Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Minnesota and Northwest Area foundations—cooperated on two reports on state issues, *Minnesota's Bottom Line* (2009) and *Beyond the Bottom Line* (2011). Another example is the Northside Funders Group in Minneapolis, a cooperative organization of a number of foundations and funders.