



# Summary of Meeting with Dan Larson

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Friday, April 13, 2007*

**Guest speaker: State Sen. Dan Larson** , chair, Senate Elections Subcommittee

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair; Lee Canning, Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), and John Rollwagen

**A. Context of the meeting** : The Civic Caucus is visiting with many knowledgeable individuals in the elections process in Minnesota, as part of the Caucus' inquiry into ways to strengthen representative democracy. The Minnesota Legislature is considering several election-related bills. Today's meeting is with the chair of the Senate committee which passes on these bills.

**B. Welcome and introduction** —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced State Sen. Dan Larson, chair, Senate Elections Subcommittee. Larson, a resident of Bloomington, has served in the Legislature since he was first elected to the House in 1998. In 2006 he was elected to the Senate. He is the author of several election-related bills in 2007, including advancing the date of the state primary, establishing a presidential primary election in Minnesota, easing voter registration, and campaign finance regulations on elections for judges.

**C. Comments and discussion** —In Larson's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

**1. Need for earlier primary date** —Larson said he is chief Senate author of a bill to advance the state primary from September to June, effective in 2010. The bill is on the floor of the Senate and the House. Larson said he has not asked for a floor vote yet because some legislators are opposed. The current interval between the primary and general election is too short, he said. The political parties spend most of the summer trying to figure out who their own candidates will be, rather than campaigning against candidates from the opposing parties.

Civic Caucus members discussed whether unendorsed candidates are put at a disadvantage with an earlier primary, because there would be less time to campaign against an endorsed candidate.

Asked about the Governor's position on the early primary bill, Larson said he understands that the Governor is generally supportive, provided the bill doesn't have other issues attached.

**2. Role of legislative caucuses in selection of candidates** —Larson acknowledged that legislative caucuses now play a significant financial role in tight legislative races. He disagreed that the legislative caucuses are the determining factor in who is picked to run for office. Larson contended

that party officials at the local level play a major role. He cited an example in 1998 from a Richfield legislative district where the House Republican caucus wanted Verne Wilcox to be nominated and the local party preferred Tim Erlander. Erlander became the nominee.

**3. Problems with precinct caucuses—** (Precinct caucuses are distinct from legislative caucuses. Precinct caucuses are grass-roots precinct-level gatherings that each political party holds every two years for purposes of selecting convention delegates and for straw votes on issues and candidates. Legislative caucuses are permanent majority and minority organizations in the House and Senate that manage the flow of legislation and, in recent years, have played major roles in legislative campaigns.)

Larson said he has long been concerned with poor attendance at some precinct caucuses. He recalls that some precinct caucuses couldn't be called to order because of poor attendance. There's no easy answer on what to do about precinct caucuses, he said. He thinks that moving the primary to June might serve to increase the importance of precinct caucuses because party endorsement will be more important.

Later in the meeting discussion returned to the precinct caucuses, when a Civic Caucus member noted that precinct caucuses seem to attract a disproportionate number of single-purpose interests. Larson said he believes more people would attend precinct caucuses with the right approach to the citizenry. He personally made special efforts in his district to improve attendance and was pleased with the outcome. People who never had attended a caucus before, and never had thought about doing so, found participation to be very satisfying.

**4. Prospects for a presidential primary in Minnesota** —Larson said he is chief author of a bill for a non-binding presidential primary in Minnesota, but he is not optimistic about the bill's chances. Such a move would alter the dynamics of how political parties in Minnesota select delegates to the national conventions, and many party people aren't excited about such a change, he said.

It is possible that Minnesota might move its precinct caucuses to February 5 in 2008, which is the date that New York and California and several other states will be holding their presidential primaries, he said. The motivation behind such a change is that straw votes at the precinct caucuses might give Minnesota more of a voice in selection of presidential nominees. Larson thinks that it would be better if Minnesota would hold its precinct caucuses two weeks later in February, at the time of the Wisconsin primary. It is very possible, he said, that a likely nominee will not come to the forefront on February 5, thereby increasing the potential influence of Minnesota's precinct caucuses two weeks later.

**5. Favorable inclination toward instant runoff voting (IRV)** —Larson said he likes the idea but is somewhat concerned about whether it is too complicated. He will be interested to watch how the city of Minneapolis, which has adopted IRV for local elections, handles the implementation, he said. It was also noted that major efforts are under way to place IRV on the ballot in St. Paul this November. Under IRV, the voter ranks candidates in order of preference; first choice votes for defeated candidates are reallocated so that a winning candidate ultimately receiving a majority of votes cast.

In discussion a member noted that with IRV candidates will need to appeal to a broader range of voters, thereby reducing the influence of single-interest groups.

**6. More partisanship and less compromise and consensus?** —Larson said House members and Senate members hardly have a chance to get to know one another. Their offices are in different buildings and, outside of conference committees, have little reason for interchange. Before changes in lobbyist laws in the 1990s, legislators would get together informally in evenings—at lobbyist-sponsored events. But those don't occur any more. Such a change means, however, that legislators can go home and be with their families at night—provided night legislative sessions aren't scheduled.

Major changes in communications technology have had their effect, too, he said. It is so much more important today to give an immediate response to a political accusation, he said, because of the influence of blogs. Continuous monitoring of blogs is required, along with providing immediate responses, because an unfounded rumor, if not countered within 48 hours, becomes thought of as "fact".

**7. Importance of quality public affairs information** —Members of the Civic Caucus said that they have major concerns about the lack of coverage of the Legislature by mainstream media. Some bright spots remain, such as the work of Erik Eskola of WCCO radio, but many other outlets don't provide anywhere near the coverage they used to. Larson said that more experienced reporters are needed at the Legislature. It is so difficult to provide quick orientation on a complex issue for someone who hasn't had extensive experienced reporting on such an issue in the past.

**8. Placing taxation-and-spending measures in the constitution** —It was noted that the Civic Caucus last fall unsuccessfully opposed an amendment to the state constitution that was adopted by the voters, providing a guaranteed portion of the state sales tax for transportation. Additional such proposals are active in 2007, for outdoors and the arts. Larson said he's not a great fan of constitutional dedication but he is supporting the outdoors and arts amendment. He supported the transportation amendment and is supporting the outdoors and arts amendment because roads, water and arts don't have the advantage of having a face behind them. Thus, they don't have as great a support in the Legislature. Larson agreed that another constitutional amendment that he supports, to guarantee health insurance for every Minnesotan, also has revenue implications.

In terms of long-term revenue sources for Minnesota, Larson said that a reduction in the size of the work force because of retirement of the baby-boomer generation will mean the state income tax won't be as productive. He likes the idea of broadening the base of the state sales tax to include such exempt items as clothing. That could be done now, he said, accompanied by a reduction in the sales tax rate.

**9. Possibility of popular vote for President** —It was noted that a national organization, Fair Vote, is trying to get individual states to commit their presidential electors to vote for the winner in the popular vote for President nationally. The effect would be to accomplish a national popular vote for President without repealing the Electoral College. Larson said he had not heard of that idea.

**10. Support for bipartisan redistricting commission** —Larson said he is a co-author on a bill authored by State Sen. Ann Rest for a constitutional amendment to establish a nine-person redistricting commission that would draw legislative and congressional district boundaries. Four persons representing the majority and minority in the Legislature would be named. Those four, by unanimous vote, would select the other five. If they fail to act, the Minnesota Supreme Court would make the appointments.

The text of the bill may be found at: <http://ros.leg.mn/bin/bldbill.php?bill=S0595.0.html&session=ls85>

A member of the Civic Caucus raised a question of whether such a bill should include a requirement to make districts competitive. It was noted that such a requirement is specifically prohibited in Iowa's redistricting approach.

**11. Selection of judges** —Larson thinks judges should not be selected by the current political elections process. He said he is aware recommendations made by a commission headed by former Gov. Al Quie, and intends to study the Quie recommendations during the interim.

**12. Learning about independent expenditures for legislative races** —Larson said one can turn to the Minnesota Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board, <http://www.cfboard.state.mn.us/>, and learn the total amount of independent contributions that were made on behalf of each candidate. Immediate disclosure of all contributions is needed, he said.

**13. Potential for Governor-Legislature agreement** —Looking toward the last six weeks of the session, Larson said he has hope that the Governor and Legislature will reach agreement. The Legislature needs to submit a plan; the Governor needs to respond, including, of course, the possibility of veto, and then the two bodies need to get together.

**14. Thanks** —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Larson for meeting with us today.

***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.**

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