Summary of Meeting with Marty Seifert

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, October 25, 2007

Guest speaker: State Rep. Marty Seifert , Marshall, MN, House Republican Minority Leader

Attendance: Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje (by phone), Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting - The Civic Caucus week-by-week is exploring issues with a variety of thought leaders about the political and governmental process in Minnesota.

B. Welcome and introduction - Verne and Paul welcomed State Rep. Marty Seifert, MN, House Republican Minority Leader. Seifert is a graduate of Southwest Minnesota State University and taught at Marshall Senior High School. He was elected at age 24 to the Minnesota House of Representatives and now is serving his 11th year. He was majority whip from 2001 to 2006 and has served as Minority Leader since November 2006.

C. Comments and discussion - In Seifert's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus, the following points were raised:

1. Reducing excessive polarization - Seifert suggested several possible changes that he feels would reduce polarization in the political process:

a. Return legislators to a non-partisan ballot - Seifert recalled that Minnesota Legislators were elected on a non-partisan ballot from 1913 to 1973. During that time legislators weren't identified by political party on the ballot.

b. Give legislators more assurance of having bills heard - Seifert believes rules should be changed to guarantee a legislative hearing for at least three bills sponsored by every legislator, regardless of party. He recalled that as chair of the State Government Finance Committee he guaranteed a hearing for every bill in that committee sponsored by any member of the House, regardless of party, seniority, or anything else.

c. Move to more of a part-time Legislature - The House majority has established more than 100 committees, subcommittees, task forces, and other groups that are imposing extreme time demands on legislators to be able to continue to hold regular jobs.

2. Concentration of power in a few legislators - Seifert was asked to comment on a Lori Sturdevant column in the Sunday Star Tribune a few weeks ago in which State Rep. Alice Hausman discussed the comparative authority of top legislative leaders with that of committee chairs and other legislators. Hausman was quoted as saying that committee chairs are not able to exercise all the leadership that normally comes with the office of chair.

Seifert replied by stating that it is his belief that Sen. Larry Pogemiller, Senate Majority Leader, inserted a significant provision—building inflation into revenue estimates—into major tax legislation without the knowledge of the chair of the tax committee.

3. Possible change in precinct caucuses and party endorsement of candidates - Seifert said something needs to change but he's not yet ready to do away with precinct caucuses. Seifert said he likes a recommendation from a commission headed by former Minnesota Secretary of State Joan Growe in 1995. The commission recommended a change in state law concerning how a candidate would get on the ballot. Major party candidates for state and federal offices would need to receive at least 20 percent of the vote on any ballot for that office at the party endorsing convention before their name could be placed on a state primary election ballot. If a candidate didn't receive the 20 percent, he or she could still make the ballot by submitting a petition signed by the number of eligible voters equal to 10 percent of persons voting on the nomination for that office at the last state primary.

4. OK to advance the primary date to August, but not June - While not wild about changing the date of the primary, Seifert accepts the idea of a August primary, before the State Fair. Such a change would mean that intra-party battles wouldn't be taking place at the fair. Such a change should be enacted in 2008 to be effective in 2010, said. He is opposed to a June primary, he said, because such a change would have the effect of requiring legislators who don't intend to run again to declare that fact before the end of the session. With a June primary, filing deadlines for office would occur while the Legislature still is meeting. If it is known that some legislators are lame ducks, such knowledge could reduce the influence of such legislators during the balance of the session.

5. Instant runoff voting (IRV) not right for general election, but might be acceptable for primary election - Seifert doesn't like the idea of requiring voters to rank candidates across parties in the general election, so he is opposed to IRV. He would fight tooth and nail against IRV in the general election. The second or third choices of voters would benefit either Republicans or Democrats depending upon the political leanings of the smaller parties. In response to a question, Seifert said he might be OK with IRV in the primary, because the second and third choices of voters will remain within one political party. Nevertheless, he doesn't endorse IRV because it is too complicated. A questioner noted that candidates in a primary election now don't have to appeal beyond a narrow base of supporters. If IRV were in existence in a primary election, then candidates would have an incentive to seek broader support within the party, beyond any narrow base related to a special interest or political leaning.

6. OK to remove redistricting from the Legislature - Seifert supports removing redistricting from the Legislature and placing the responsibility in a commission. He has no strong feelings whether the Iowa approach (retaining some potential legislative influence) or a more independent commission

should be used. He said the current districting of the Legislature, ordered by the court, seems pretty fair, because Republicans first were in control of the House with 82 seats and now the Democrats, under the same redistricting plan, are in control with 85 seats.

7. Growing role of legislative caucuses in organizing and financing campaigns - As minority leader Seifert assumes chief responsibility for enlisting Republicans to run in all 134 House districts in 2008. Consequently, he is spending a great deal of time traveling around the state talking with potential candidates. On the matter of financing, Seifert said that independent expenditures have grown immensely with the courts ruling in favor of free speech. A member of the Civic Caucus noted that in an earlier meeting a speaker had outlined in detail the very intensive role that the legislative caucuses play in certain highly competitive election contests. Sometimes the caucuses prepare and pay for campaign brochures that feature attacks on the other party's candidates-without the knowledge of their own candidates.

8. Voters turned off? - Seifert disputed claims that Minnesotans are cynical about polarization and paralysis in state government and aren't bothering to vote. Minnesota always ranks among the top five states in voter turnout, he said.

9. Opposition to Legislature's giving special interests access to preferred financing via the constitution - Seifert said he is opposed to guaranteeing to arts and outdoors interests a share of the state sales tax via a state constitutional amendment. He recalls that after voting "no" the next day game and fish interests came into his office proclaiming they were able to vote State Sen. Dean Johnson out of office after he opposed such amendments and that they would vote Seifert out of office, too. It is important, Seifert said, that the Legislature not abdicate its responsibility on revenue-raising and spending. Seifert said a poll taken at a citizens' meeting in Hugo, MN, the other night produced only three votes in favor of the Legislature's enacting constitutional amendments to give preferred revenue protection for some functions over others.

10. Support for a part-time Legislature - Seifert said he would prefer that the Legislature meet in regular session every two years and drastically reduce the amount of time in session during the other year. Such an approach would allow legislators to spend more time in their regular jobs and with their constituents. He recalled a previous session in which the Legislature didn't meet on Friday, so legislators could go home for time for things like town meetings, real jobs, family and other constituent meetings in
their districts.

11. Concern over transportation funding - Seifert bemoaned the fact that the Legislature couldn't agree on a transportation bill in the recent special session, despite the fact that the Governor, who originally was opposed, said he'd support a 5-cent increase and that was a logical compromise to make, given that the DFL had proposed a 10-cent increase.

Continuing the gas tax discussion, Seifert noted that the money for the gasoline tax is not distributed equitably according to where the congestion is greatest, the 15 counties that make up the Twin Cities metropolitan area. He acknowledged that he is a rural legislator but he believes more new money

should be going to the urban area, which has the congestion. Existing funds should not be ripped from the rural area. Provisions of the state constitution guarantee special treatment to rural areas in distribution of the gasoline tax, he noted. For example, only 62 percent of the gasoline tax can be spent on state trunk highways, with the other 38 percent going to counties and cities. Other provisions guarantee additional benefits to rural roads, irrespective of needs, he noted.

Seifert favors passage of a $1 billion bonding bill in 2008, with $500 million dedicated to roads and bridges.

12. Concern over MnDOT - Certain recent decisions by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) are not passing the "coffee shop test", Seifert said, meaning that the decisions aren't supported by average folks in the main street coffee shop. He cited specifically the decision by MnDOT to award the contract to the highest bidder for rebuilding the collapsed 35W bridge in Minneapolis. A member of the Civic Caucus wondered whether changes in the structure of decision-making on transportation need to be made.

13. Concern over funding of education - Seifert said he voted against the education funding bill for the first time last year. The bill provided a 2 percent increase in the first year and a 1 percent increase in the second year, with some additional money for special education. Some majority DFL legislators seem to consistently favor money for welfare over education, he claimed.

Continuing his comments on education, Seifert noted that in 1972, the year he was born, the school year was 6.3 days longer than it is today. Today the school bus companies and the coaches seem to have the most influence over the length of the school day, with some high schoolers finishing their school day by 2 p.m.

He spoke against federal mandates that are not adequately funded. The federal No Child Left Behind act is a "disaster", he said.

Much more attention is needed to equalize funding among school districts across the state.

It's vital, he said, for immigrants to be immersed in English, even though such ideas might not be deemed politically correct. We're cheating people out of the American dream by not insisting the immigrants become fluent in reading and writing English.

14. To whom is the legislator responsible and accountable? - Seifert said he is responsible first to the people of his district, who elected him. Second he is responsible to the state of Minnesota, and third, as minority leader he is responsible to his caucus. He mentioned that what is good for a district might not be good for the state as a whole. The biggest ethanol plant in Minnesota is located in his district. But he also needs to be asking, in representing the people of the state, whether the move to ethanol is the best strategy.

15. Change in selection of judges - Seifert supports a change. He knows three district judges in and near Marshall, but has no idea of who the rest of them are in other southwestern Minnesota locations, such as Fairmont and Worthington. He likes the approach of merit-based appointment with a retention

election as proposed by the commission headed by former Governor Al Quie. The retention election gives the people some influence over the process, he said. Under the Quie proposal, judges would be subject periodically to an election in which voters would choose only whether the judges should remain in office or not. If voted out of office, a replacement would be appointed by the governor from a list of candidates approved by a merit-based commission.

In some ways, Seifert still likes the idea of voters electing the judges, but perhaps by voters in each judicial district Reform has to take place one way or another.

16. Thanks - On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Seifert for meeting with us today.

T he 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.
Click Here to see a biographical statement of each.