



Summary of Meeting with Tony Sertich

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, November 15, 2007

Present: Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Clarence Shallbetter (all by phone)

Guest speaker: State Rep. Tony Sertich, Chisholm, MN, DFL majority leader, Minnesota House of Representatives

A. Context of the meeting— Today's meeting is one of several meetings the Civic Caucus is conducting with elected officials and others, concerning the status of representative democracy within Minnesota.

B. Introduction— Paul introduced State Rep. Tony Sertich, Chisholm, MN, DFL majority leader, Minnesota House of Representatives. Sertich was first elected to the Minnesota House in 2000 at the age of 24, making him the youngest member of the Legislature. Sertich is a graduate of Hamline University where he received degrees in theatre and political science. In late 2006, he was elected House majority leader.

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

Sertich's role as chair of the House Rules Committee— Sertich highlighted two major responsibilities. One is to handle the business aspects of the House, including human resources, budget, and supplies. The other is to set up the calendar for the House in consultation with the Speaker.

To whom Sertich is accountable— Sertich said he is responsible to the district he represents, to the state as a whole, to his DFL caucus, and to the House of Representatives.

Strong partisan divisions evident— A Civic Caucus member commented that it appears very difficult for the Legislature today to reach consensus because of polarization among members of the Legislature. Sertich replied that trust needs to be rebuilt between competing factions and legislators need to look beyond the next election. A member replied that so many legislators don't know one another personally. Sertich said that the Iron Range Delegation hosts a party every two years for legislators and staff of all political parties so that members can get to know each other better.

Standoff between House and Senate?— A member said it seems that a standoff between the House and Senate occurs almost automatically, irrespective of party. Sertich agreed that tension exists between the two bodies but he is proud of what the Legislature did this year, on time. Most, if not all, budget bills were on the Governor's desk a month before adjournment.

Difficulty with precinct caucuses—Sertich acknowledged difficulties with precinct caucuses. Many in the younger generation prefer to do things on-line, than simply attending meetings. He's not comfortable in suggesting a change, because he likes the face-to-face opportunities offered by precinct caucuses.

In a follow-up question, Sertich was asked why a political party would put so much pressure on everyone to support endorsed candidates, who often emerge from within a questionable precinct caucus system. If the precinct caucus system is flawed, shouldn't the party be more open to challenges to endorsed candidates? Sertich said the main reason for discouraging challenges is the desire to avoid intra-party competition and concentrate resources on inter-party competition.

Impact of the growing influence of legislative caucuses— (Legislative caucuses are permanent organizations of the majority and the minority within the House and Senate, as distinguished from precinct caucuses, the name given to once-a-biennium gatherings of citizens at the precinct level.) Sertich said it is important for the legislative caucuses to play a significant role in enlisting candidates to run for the Legislature. All legislators ought to face competition in elections, even so-called "safe" incumbents, because an election campaign requires everyone to stand accountable to the electorate.

A member noted that some legislators believe that legislative caucuses play too strong a role in local legislative campaigns. Some legislators complain they don't even know in advance about—and are uncomfortable with—brochures prepared by legislative caucuses that attack their opponents. Another member inquired whether legislators who are elected with significant legislative caucus support aren't obligated to support the caucus position. Sertich said his caucus imposes no such obligation on its members. Continuing the discussion, a member noted that much of the financial support today for legislative caucuses seems to come from special interests.

Returning to the question of influence in selection of candidates, Sertich said that his legislative caucus tries to stay out of competition at the local level until a preferred candidate emerges. Then the legislative caucus tries to help that candidate get elected. Referring to himself, Sertich said he would not be in his position today were it not for the local people supporting him.

Support for a June primary— Sertich favors moving the date of the state primary election forward to as June. He is not troubled by proximity of a June primary to a spring legislative session. A June primary will encourage the Legislature to finish its work early. Incumbents who haven't filed for re-election would see their influence enhanced because there'd be less political posturing.

Retain some legislative oversight in redistricting— Sertich discussed proposals to transfer redistricting from the Legislature to an outside commission as long as the Legislature had some form of oversight.

Opposition to term limits— Sertich said he opposes term limits. The state gets considerable benefit from experienced legislators. Moreover, the State Legislature has had 70 percent turnover in recent years, without any requirement for term limits. In response to a question, Sertich said committee chairs now must relinquish their positions after three terms.

Support for meeting annually— Sertich would not support returning to one legislative session every two years. With instant communication widespread today, the electorate is insisting that issues be faced immediately, not be delayed for up to 18 months until the next biennial session would begin.

Support for constitutional amendment on outdoors— Asked about the Legislature's growing tendency to abdicate its responsibility and refer certain tax and spending issues on to the voters, Sertich said he supports a pending constitutional amendment for clean water and the outdoors. He has witnessed repeated failures in the legislative process to get sufficient funding, and he sees the need for long-term assurances for financing. A member replied that it is difficult to see why clean water and outdoors deserve special treatment when almost every function of government can make the same argument.

Sertich was asked why the Legislature not only would give constitutional protection for certain functions like the outdoors but also give special interests preferred access to the Legislature on how the money should be spent. Sertich said that provision has not yet been decided. It was in the Senate version, but not the House version.

Instant runoff voting merits consideration— Sertich likes the idea of instant runoff voting (IRV) and is inclined to support enabling legislation for cities in Minnesota. Special interest groups don't like IRV, he said.

Question of matching dollar needs for transportation with funding sources— A member noted that constitutional dedication of the gasoline tax to specific levels of government produces a mismatch between needs and funding. Sertich said he struggles with the fact that our local units of government need the funds, too.

Continuing the discussion of transportation, another committee member noted that the "needs" for all types of transportation in Minnesota are astronomical. To think Minnesota has trouble raising the gasoline tax even 5 cents, the kind of funding that would be required to meet the "needs" is impossible to reach. Thus, the member said, the state urgently must find a way to set priorities in such a way that cuts across units of government and types of transportation.

Sertich replied that he just returned from a national legislators' conference where the discussion focused on providing a variety of sources. A member replied that transportation has many sources of revenue available to it, including varieties of user fees and capturing land value benefits. Thus, the member suggested, general taxes, like sales taxes, ought to be preserved for other functions which don't have access to the kinds of revenue sources available to transportation. The member noted, for example, that major new development is contemplated at I-494 and Hwy. 100 on the Bloomington-Edina border. Such development will impose additional transportation costs and also will enhance

land values in the neighborhood. Why can't the public capture some of the windfall from increasing land values? Sertich said he is looking for new and different reliable sources for transportation.

Asked about whether all additional dollars for transportation ought to be placed in one fund, Sertich said he doesn't want to short-change local government.

Possible restructuring of transportation decision-making— Sertich was asked to comment on a proposal for restructuring transportation decision-making in a Civic Caucus report issued in 2003. That proposal calls for a governor-appointed Transportation Commission that would present comprehensive transportation plans to the Legislature. Sertich replied that the Legislature ought to be in on making appointments to such a commission.

15. Thanks— On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Paul thanked Sertich 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.