



Summary of Meeting with State Rep. Joe Atkins

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, February 22, 2008

Guest speaker: State Rep. Joe Atkins, Inver Grove Heights, MN, co-chair of the House-Senate 2020 Conference

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Charles Clay, Diane Flynn, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Wayne Popham (by phone), Zach Pettus, Citizens League; Tim Schuster, Citizens League, and Kelly Weber (Citizens League)

A. Context of the meeting —The Civic Caucus has been reviewing issues of polarization and paralysis in the Minnesota Legislature. Today we're learning more about a group of legislators on both sides of the aisle who have organized themselves into a bipartisan group, the 2020 Conference.

B. Welcome and introductions —Verne and Paul welcomed **State Rep. Joe Atkins**, Inver Grove Heights. Atkins, a lawyer and DFLer, formerly served on the Inver Grove Heights School Board, and later as mayor of Inver Grove Heights. He was first elected to the Minnesota House in 2002 and re-elected in 2004 and 2006. He chairs the House Commerce and Labor Committee. He is co-chair along with Sen. Goeff Michel, Edina Republican, of the Minnesota 2020 Conference, a voluntary organization of legislators.

C. Comments and discussion —During Atkins' comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Background on the 2020 Conference —The 2020 Conference was formed in 2005, with both House and Senate and majority and minority members represented. Today the Conference has just over 60 members, almost equally represented by Republicans and Democrats and members of the House and Senate, Atkins said..

2. Objectives of the 2020 Conference —One can get an idea of the Conference's objectives from the name of the organization, he said. In the year 2020 a demographic development will occur in Minnesota that probably is unprecedented in the history of the planet. That is the year in which the number of elderly in Minnesota (persons over age 65) will first exceed the school age population (age 5-19). The Conference was formed, as its website states, "to highlight the need to prepare today for tomorrow's significant demographic changes."

3. Need for longer-range planning —Mostly the state looks two to four years in the future, Atkins said. The 2020 Conference thinks the state needs to look 20-30 years ahead. Think of the way individuals invest in higher education, he said. We don't hesitate putting money into four years of college, because we have confidence that such an investment will bear fruit 20 to 30 years in the future. The 2020 conference consults frequently with Tom Stinson, state economist, and Tom Gillaspie, state demographer, he said.

4. Long-term care a key issue —In light of demographic changes, the 2020 Conference has made long-term care a major focus, particularly trying to find new options for seniors to be able to continue to live in their own homes, he said. During discussion with Atkins it was noted that Citizens League representatives are present at today's meeting. The Citizens League has placed long term care as one of its top priorities. Atkins said that the 2020 Conference has a close relationship with the Citizens League and relies heavily on Citizens League research.

5. Emphasis on building relationships —The 2020 Conference is concentrating on building relationships among legislators across party lines and between House and Senate. It is amazing, he said, that many members of the House and Senate, even of the same political party, don't know each other.

6. Preserving flexibility on revenue and spending —Atkins was asked whether the dedication of revenues to certain services represents a trend for the state to the year 2020 and beyond. Atkins replied by citing recent legislative actions providing for dedication of taxes to outdoors, water and the arts, and to transit and roads. Dedication is attractive to some legislators, he said, because it is easier for them to inform taxpayers exactly what function is being helped by a given revenue source. He feels that probably the Legislature should not move any further in this direction, however.

A Civic Caucus member noted that demands for tax dollars far exceed the revenues that ever will be available. Thus the key question is how do you, with limited dollars, set priorities among competing services, something that isn't possible if each service has its own guaranteed revenue source.

7. Needed leadership on transportation —A Civic Caucus member asked whether it shouldn't be possible for a comprehensive transportation plan to be presented to the Legislature, even with the existence of separate funding sources, many of them constitutionally guaranteed for different jurisdictions. With a comprehensive plan presented, the Legislature could have an opportunity to have a stronger role in setting priorities across jurisdictions, without just bemoaning the fact that different revenues are guaranteed to different jurisdictions. The member noted that a comprehensive plan could include a strong commitment to congestion relief, with a need for priorities to be set across many jurisdictions involved in transportation, such as the state, counties, and cities, and transit organizations. Atkins said he has no disagreement with the need to set such priorities.

The group discussed the approval yesterday by the Legislature of a transportation bill that will increase the gasoline tax by 8 1/2 cents, increase vehicle license fees, and impose a 1/4 cent sales tax in the metropolitan area. It was noted that the Governor had made a separate proposal for bonding but has promised a veto on tax increases. Some persons wondered if the approach followed by the Legislature—to pass a bill quickly, without debating the Governor's proposal—is representative of an effort to reach consensus. Atkins said the legislative leadership might have been too unyielding in passing its own bill so quickly, without evaluating other options.

Atkins said he looked over yesterday's bill quickly and was pleased to see language that talked about setting priorities, such as, for example, emphasizing using the funds for projects of regional significance and for projects of greatest congestion.

8. Difficulty with 2020 Conference proposal on long-term budget planning —Atkins said a key part of the 2020 Conference legislative program this year was a proposal for requiring 10-year budget projections. However, the bill has little chance of approval this year because a fiscal note prepared by legislative staff estimated the cost of such projections at \$15 million.

9. Strong support for redistricting —Moving on to other topics, Atkins said he would change the present system for redistricting in a heartbeat. The present process with heavy legislative involvement creates a great deal of ill will. Someone else, not legislators, should be drawing the boundaries.

10. Support for a presidential primary in Minnesota —Atkins said that the large numbers of Minnesotans who wanted to vote on precinct caucus night clearly indicates that citizens want a chance to participate in the process of selecting the President, and Atkins believes that a presidential preference primary here is better than using the precinct caucuses.

11. Support for more open nominations for other offices —It was noted that the political parties try to discourage others from filing in primary elections against party endorsees. Atkins replied that we should have an open primary because we shouldn't be discouraging people from seeking public office. In fact, we should hope for as many candidates as possible.

12. Support for experiments in Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) —Atkins said he would love to see IRV tried in the state on a pilot basis. If it works, then it could be implemented more widely.

13. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Atkins for meeting with us today.

Participant Responses to This Interview

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.

[Click Here](#) to see a biographical statement of each.