



# Summary of Meeting with State Sen. David Senjem

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Thursday, January 10, 2008*

**Present:** Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Wayne Popham (by phone)

**Guest speaker: State Senator David Senjem** , Minnesota Senate Republican Minority Leader

**A. Context of the meeting—** This is another in a series of meetings the Civic Caucus has been conducting with legislative leaders, discussing issues of polarization and paralysis as well as several election-related matters.

**B. Welcome and introduction-** Verne and Paul introduced Sen. David Senjem, leader of the Republican minority caucus in the Minnesota Legislature. Senjem was first elected to the Senate in 2002. He represents District 29 which includes all of Dodge County, and the North and Westerly portions of Olmsted County including half of Rochester. In November 2006, Senjem was elected by his caucus to serve as the Senate Republican Leader.

Senjem graduated from Hayfield High School and received a BA from Luther College. Senjem has decades of community involvement including 11 years on the Rochester City Council, four years as a Park Board member, and six years as a member of the Olmsted County Environmental Commission. Senjem has been employed at the Mayo Clinic since 1964. He currently serves as an institutional bio-safety officer and is responsible for all aspects of environmental regulatory compliance.

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

**1. Dedication to public service—** Senjem said he has spent a lifetime in public service. A great-grandfather of his served in the Legislature in the 1800s. Senjem once served as vice president of the U.S. Jaycees. He's very positive about Rochester, where he lives and works, and which he regards as the greatest city in America. He thinks the Mayo Clinic is the greatest organization in the America.

**2. Polarization not as serious as many would think—** There is no question that issues like abortion caused major splits beginning in the 1970s, he said. Other issues too, like gay marriage, are divisive. But he believes in the Senate at least that a great deal of goodwill exists. Senator Senjem regards his

relationship with Senator Pogimiller as cordial, as a working relationship, and as a relationship involving frequent visits and other interchanges related to Senate policy and procedures. He made a strong commitment when he became minority leader to help bring more civility to the state Senate. A member of the Civic Caucus said that the recent legislative session on transportation seemed to reveal considerable difficulty in developing consensus in the Legislature. Senjem said there's not a lot of opportunity in legislative committees for discussion of compromise. The majority party presents its platform in bill form

**3. Question of centralizing decisions in the top legislative leadership—** Senjem was asked to comment on concerns of Rep. Hausman that too many decisions in the 2007 Legislature seemed concentrated in the Governor and the caucus leaders in the House and Senate. Senjem replied that after five months the Governor and Legislature weren't in agreement and the Legislature would have looked silly in the eyes of the public if it simply passed a bill to be vetoed. Thus the leaders and the Governor worked something out among them.

**4. Leadership is key in improving the process—** Asked whether he is proposing any structural changes to improve the legislative process, Senjem said that you fix the system through leadership.

**5. Precinct caucuses no longer workable—** Senjem believes the precinct caucus held at the community level in election years might have been a good idea in years past, but no longer. He recalled that he went to his first precinct caucus in 1972. At that time attendance at precinct caucuses was deemed a civic duty. Too many people who participate in precinct caucuses are polarized. He thinks it would be better to move directly to primary elections. Barely 600 persons attend precinct caucuses in all of Olmsted County, with a population of about 137,000, Senjem said.

It was noted in discussion that political parties can schedule precinct caucuses, whether or not they are mandated by law. Thus, Senjem was asked, what kind of changes in law would be necessary to bypass the precinct caucus system. He said he has not explored the question in detail.

Also in discussion it was noted that political parties work hard to discourage primary challenges to endorsed candidates, even though those candidates have emerged through a questionable precinct caucus process.

**6. Move date of the primary forward—** He'd move the date of the primary forward, but he wasn't specific about how far.

**7. Legislative caucuses step in where political parties have withdrawn—** Moving on to a discussion of legislative caucuses (the majority and minority organizational groups in the House and Senate), Senjem agreed that legislative leaders, including himself, spend way too much time raising money for their caucuses and recruiting candidates. The next Senate election is two years away, but he's already heavily involved. He wishes there were a way that legislators could give the responsibility back to the political parties so that legislators could concentrate on issues.

Considerable financing from majority and minority caucuses was used in a recent special election in Northfield for a state Senate vacancy, he said. The financing couldn't be given directly to candidates, so the caucuses used the money for independent expenditures.

**8. Opposition to legislating via the state constitution—** Senjem said he is opposed to a proposed

constitutional amendment for outdoors, water and the arts that is likely to receive serious consideration in the 2008 session. One shouldn't turn to the constitution as a vehicle simply because the Legislature is sharply divided on passing legislation, he said. That is a dangerous trend, he said. It was noted that the Legislature passed a transportation funding issue to the voters in 2006. Senjem said he knows the outdoors-water-arts proposal is supported strongly by sportsmen, who helped defeat Sen. Dean Johnson in the 2006 election. The amendment is being pushed, he said, because it is a reality today that the costs of education and health and welfare have grown so fast that it is increasingly difficult for other services to compete for funds.

**9. Impact of a "no tax increase" pledge—** It was noted that a no-tax-increase pledge had been taken by Gov. Pawlenty when he was first elected. Senjem said that except for transportation he's opposed to a tax increase. He noted that the budget was increased by 9.2 percent for the current biennium. That should be enough, he said. He recalls the state budget was \$27.2 billion when he was elected and five years later it is \$34.6 billion, or about \$6,900 per person in the state. Senjem said he is open to an increase in the state gasoline tax, using that increase to leverage economies elsewhere in the budget.

**10. Finding ways to spend better—** Noting his 44 years at the Mayo Clinic, Senjem said the state ought to be able to re-design the way it does things, with the help of new technology. He also raised the question of whether the state has too many counties. He thinks educators need to make better use of new technology. Six-year-olds already know more about technology than many of their grandparents.

**11. Keep redistricting as it is—** Senjem doesn't favor changes in redistricting. He likes the responsibility to remain with the Legislature, with the courts as a back-up as necessary. The courts are as neutral body as you will find. He recalls that in the latest redistricting, court representatives were very careful to recognize that Rochester should be part of two Senate districts in Olmsted County.

**12. GOP minority caucus objectives for 2008 Session—** Senjem outlined the following elements:

- a. Rethink the No-Child-Left-Behind act
- b. Make government work
- c. Pass a transportation bill
- d. Enact a balanced approach to energy.

Senjem said his priorities will be to represent the position of his caucus well and to conduct himself in as dignified manner as possible.

**13. Importance of early childhood development—** Senjem said he favors an approach that would emphasize the needs of at-risk children. His only concern, he said, is budgetary impact. A member of the Civic Caucus noted that Art Rolnick is emphasizing that funds for early childhood should be regarded as an investment.

**14. Senjem favorable to Quie commission report on judiciary—** Senjem said he is favorable to the Quie proposal for changing the method of selecting judges—merit-based appointment with

retention elections at the end of a term. He believes some aspect of elections needs to be retained. He also has been attracted to a proposal put forth by former Sen. Tom Neuville, under which the Governor would make the appointments, subject to periodic reconfirmation by the Senate, although he said such an approach might be cumbersome.

**15. Opposition to Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)**— The concept of IRV is foreign to him, Senjem said. He said he's old-fashioned enough to like the idea of the voter selecting only one candidate. Our voting system is a special part of citizenship, he said, and he wants to keep it as it is. A Civic Caucus member noted that an advantage of IRV might be that candidates would engage in less negative campaigning, knowing that they need support voters whose first choices are other candidates. Senjem said he had not thought about that aspect.

**16. Thanks**— On behalf of the Civic Caucus Verne thanked Senjem for visiting 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.**

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