Summary of Meeting with Sean Kershaw, Executive Director, Citizens League

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, June 19, 2009

Present: Verne Johnson (chair); David Broden, Janis Clay (phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Jan Hively, Bryn Lindblad, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald, John Mooty, Wayne Popham (phone), and Zack Taylor.

A. Context of the meeting -The Civic Caucus is in the midst of its summer planning-sessions, alternating weekly between speakers and internal discussion. Today's speaker comes from an organization that is interwoven with the Caucus in history, in format, and in the background of their personnel and membership.

B. Welcome and introductions - Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Sean Kershaw**, Executive Director of the Citizens League. In 2003, Sean Kershaw became just the sixth Citizens League Executive Director in its 50-plus-year-history. Sean had been a member of the Citizens League Board of Directors since 1996, and co-chaired the Citizens League's 50th Anniversary report, *Doing the Common Good Better.*

Sean left his position as Deputy Director for the City of Saint Paul's Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED), where he had worked for 11 years. During his tenure, Sean chaired then-Mayor Norm Coleman's e-Government initiative and coordinated Coleman's information technology, charter school and education initiatives. Sean also worked as community outreach coordinator on the Mayor's Y2K initiative (where he learned many now-important aspects of community emergency preparedness.). Before coming to Minnesota, Sean was planning coordinator for the Public Housing Authority in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. He has a BA in Sociology from Haverford College.

Also present was Bryn Lindblad, summer intern with the Citizens League, and Zack Taylor, a doctoral student of political philosophy from the University of Toronto. He is in town on a grant as part of a study on metro areas. Zack has studied the history of the Citizens League, and is interested to attend today's Caucus session.

C. Comments and discussion -During Kershaw's comments and in discussion, the following points were raised:

1. More interactive Citizens League meetings— In response to member interest in more interactive and social discussions, not just listening to speakers passively with little time for conversation and questions, Kershaw said that the format for many of their meetings, including their new "Imagination Works" series, is changing. For example, at their June 25 breakfast with Curt Johnson, they will have 20 minutes of presentation from Curt, followed by discussion at tables and then extended conversation and questions with Curt.

2. An exceptional state— Minnesota is an exceptional state, Sean said. "Things that we're proud of were built here by our predecessors. Our success is due to our ability to solve problems together." To accomplish this, a "civic infrastructure" (the ability of all types of individuals and institutions to work together to solve problems) had to be established and maintained. He passed around the 150th anniversary postage stamp for the state of Minnesota. On it there is a picture of a bridge, spanning a river-a combination, Sean commented, of natural resources supplemented by man-made structures.

Discussing the role of technology and economy in today's world, Sean said that, "When the world changes, we need to change with it. Scale and technology blew up the old type of civic infrastructure…it's not a surprise that we need to rethink our approach to civic affairs." The bridge in the stamp was closed down, in fact, because it needed to be significantly retro-fitted.

3. New approach on public policy —"Our *system* of solving public problems is stuck today, and we're not getting the outcomes we need.," Minnesotans in general, and most people in these systems want to do much better and want to be more engaged in this process. Sean said. "It is not good enough to tell institutions like schools or other organizations to do better, assuming the problem is a management problem." Sometimes there needs instead to be a redesign of the system itself.

"The same is true with our most important state policy issues.". Politicization, partisanship, lack of creative ideas-these are symptoms of a broken system. They are less the cause of the problems. We need new models for addressing policy issues.

In a project for the state's 150th anniversary (MAP 150: www.map150.org) the League discovered that Minnesotans have a strong desire to be engaged in policy, but the traditional ways of involving them don't necessarily work as they used to. A Caucus member asked Sean if he thinks the League will come to better outcomes by having greater public involvement? "We can," Sean replied, and cited as examples of involving high school students on school reform, seniors on aging issues or families on mental health issues. The important point is to bring people who are impacted by problems into the process of defining and addressing these problems. It isn't engagement for engagement's sake.

"Getting back to 30,000 feet," a member came in, thinking about the League's role in things for the state, "the Citizens League is a little de Toqueville idea." It is the public gathering, he said to tell the government-the republic-what to do. The reference was to Alexis de Toqueville, French political thinker and historian who wrote about his travels to the United States early in the 19th century. de Toqueville was attracted by Americans coming together in common purpose.

The member asked: "We've got the Republic, the government, and then we have got the civic engagement. The question to ask ourselves is how we can get them to blend together more than they stand in opposition?"

The Citizens League of old was speaking primarily to the heads of the Republic. The League today it seems is working for the other process within Toqueville's study of Democracy in America: a definition active citizenship and civic engagement that recognizes the governing role all institutions play - not just government. It is an elaboration on the same essential model that has worked so well for the league in years past.

4. Changes in volume of work in Citizens League— A criticism of the League, Sean said, is that they are not putting out the volume of work today as in years past. He attributes this in large part to a decrease in staff size. The classic League study committee is labor intensive. They do continue to operate such committees, and will into the future. However, the League is using technology, policy review groups, workshops and other mechanisms to increase member involvement in producing policy statements with existing staff.

5. Advantages of Citizens League committees— Through the study committee process people come together and form strong relationships, despite inevitable differences, Sean said. Committees are eclectic, and non-partisan. The necessary information is learned, knowledge derived, and recommendations formed from that process. The committee works to get to the root of the problem. "Imagination of better policy solutions and building the capacity to implement these solutions are key to relevance," Sean said.

6. New model of civic engagement— The League is now pursuing a balance between this sort of classic policy work and a new model that integrates policy development, active citizenship and civic leadership, and is enabled by new technology. "By broader, more diverse and representative involvement you come up with a better frame to the problem," Sean said, "and then you have a built-in group to implement any solutions that come from their being part of the process."

A caucus member said that he sees increased involvement in the League through digital technologies risking a loss of the educational component that brings members to a proper degree of competence on the issues.

"We need to do better on that," Sean said. Instead of inundating people with information, the League staff has found it more useful to ask people what would you like to know?. Rather than involving people just to educate them, we need to help educate people on issues in order to better-involve them.

"It is important to bring people along as reports are drafted," a member observed. The League is doing so presently, Sean said, and social media helps to keep members in tune with what's going on.

7. The challenge of implementation —A Caucus member commented on the challenge to civic organizations, including the Civic Caucus and the Citizens League, of gaining implementation of recommendations in reports. "We're not talking about our (the Citizens League's) successes enough," Sean responded. Transportation and mental health both saw results come from their reports.

8. Changing corporate involvement —"You face the challenge that corporate executives are no longer involved as they used to be," a member said. Executives would sit on committees, donate to support the League. They would encourage their employees to be involved.

Sean said that, "We are bringing back corporations through on-site programs for their employees." The League does anywhere from one to eight such programs-about public issues, civic engagement-for some of the largest corporations in the state. They really like this model, and it may be the future for corporate involvement in public affairs.

9. Citizens League 2009 work plan —Sean distributed a one-page work plan for the League in 2009. It includes plans to continue evolving policy work toward the goal of civic engagement; to assemble a base of supporters with the capacity to work on the League's policy agenda, and financial and membership targets.

A member observed that he didn't see the restructuring or redesigning of public systems to be a priority in the work plan. Sean said this could be more clear perhaps, but all the issues the League is interested in-poverty, education, aging, business-are rooted in questions of structure and system redesign.

10. Encouraging more people to participate— A member wondered, "What is the process through which we can encourage everybody to become engaged?" Israel has national service, she said. "We need to get people started on the process," Sean said, citing high school students engaged in a Citizens League online venture called Students Speak Out. SSO students become involved where they are (schools), talking about issues they know (school culture, problems, teachers). These students learn how to be civically involved through this program. In general this process holds. People learn how to be civically involved through institutions where they spend time.

11. Seeking closer Citizens League/Civic Caucus relationships— As the meeting came to an end, Sean requested at the League and the Caucus seek a stronger, perhaps structural, link. Verne Johnson agreed. Representatives of the two organizations will be meeting this summer.

12. Thanks —Sean has revitalized the League, a member commented, and brought in young people. Good job. Thanks all around.