



Summary of Discussion with Jane Leonard

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, September 4, 2009

Present: Verne Johnson (Chair); David Broden, Paul Gilje, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald, Bob White, Jim Hetland (phone)

A. Context of the meeting - For two years from 2007 through 2008 Jane Leonard served as Executive Director of the Minnesota Statehood Sesquicentennial Commission. The group held monthly meetings during that time to plan for events, grant programs, civic engagement efforts regarding Minnesota's future, and to put together materials to commemorate the state's history.

As director of this effort, Ms. Leonard is well positioned to speak to what common themes she heard on the question: *What kind of state do Minnesotans want?*

B. Welcome and introductions - Jane Leonard is President of Minnesota Rural Partners, Inc. and the Strategic Coordination Manager for the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board. From 2007 through 2008, Jane was Executive Director of the Minnesota Statehood Sesquicentennial Commission.

For 25 years, in various positions with the public, private, and non-profit sectors, Jane has worked to build a healthy balance between civic society and market-based economy. In honor of that work, she was named the U.S. Small Business Administration's Regional Champion Award winner and Minnesota's Home-Based Business Advocate of the Year for 2004-2005. In 2006 Jane was named a University of Minnesota Alumni of Notable Achievement for her work in entrepreneurship, community technology and rural development policy.

Jane holds a M.A. in communications from the University of Minnesota and has a B.S. in journalism and agriculture from the University of Maryland. She lives in St. Anthony Park, St Paul, Minnesota, and co-owns the family farm in Isle Harbor Township with her siblings.

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

1. A sense of exceptionalism —A member asked Leonard what she thought the central message of the commission's Plan for the Future report to be; what do people want the state to be?

"Everyone wants Minnesota to be what they imagine it to be," she said. The state Historical Society put out a book, 'Minnesota: Real and Imagined (2001)," with the central message that Minnesotans have a sense of exceptionalism about their state; that we're the type of state where if you're an R or a D you believe in the state. I think that has slipped; is slipping. We're more about party now."

2. Need to invest in ourselves— "We are losing sight of the fact that we need to invest in ourselves," she said. A member asked: Is it a matter of dollars, not reform? Leonard responded that she's surprised at the level of political fighting at the legislature. There is little talk of ideas and what we value as a state, together. Working on the Sesquicentennial of statehood was difficult, because people had lost sight of what it means to be a state - statehood in the sense of working together for common goals in a democratic society - and instead we have lots of fragmented interests.

The commission's work identified one specific area for investment, somewhat serendipitously through their sesquicentennial micro grant program. The grants, provided to rural and urban communities, were quite effective in energizing people.

"While little money, they got people excited," Leonard said. "People would say, 'We got \$1,000 to pursue a project-this is great. How can we get the most out of this?'" It created the sense that the state was a partner.

There was discussion in the meeting about structural change, though the commission did not take the issue on heavily. "There is not enough idea-sharing of activities across the state," she argued. "People are still acting too much in isolation. An effective role for government is as a catalyst and connector. It should spur people, and help lift ideas up beyond the locale and region."

3. Use of election campaign for raising major issues— A member asked Leonard if there is something to be gained by looking to the campaign to be a place to press the question of moving Minnesota into a new phase.

"Yes; we are looking for a leader who thinks of their role in the state not in terms of party, but for solving problems." She continued: "We have to rely on a representative government, but we also have to rely on ourselves. Take responsibility. For example, for the Sesquicentennial Plan for the Future, we asked people what they would personally say at the bicentennial, fifty years from now, about what they did at the sesquicentennial...to make the state a better place?"

4. Key issues that need to be addressed —What are some topics that emerged from the commission's work on the Plan for the Future that should be addressed in the race for governor?

1. Environment and water: health, water supply
2. Education: investments in early childhood, both structured preschool and programs
3. Social services: aging assistance, and assisted- and full-time care
4. Economy/workforce: looking at the economic contributions of the whole family

Civic involvement was a theme in the focus groups and surveys for the Sesquicentennial Plan for the Future. "There is concern that people are taking what we have in Minnesota for granted; that they

don't see they need to stay involved." And yet, many people also said in the focus groups for the Plan for the Future that they would and do contribute to their community - volunteering, running for local offices, etc.

"We are becoming more racially and culturally diverse, which is something we need to pay attention to. Hispanic, Somali, Hmong immigrants; in a way it is like the early 1900's. Immigrants have a vibrant entrepreneurial energy, which Minnesota needs more of now."

One member brought up an interesting point: We had a 20-year period of governors, from Perpich through Carlson, that were not put forward by their party. Now we have a state government that is less by and for the people-more a government by The Party, for The Party.

5. Rural issues— Going back to her time in the Perpich administration, Leonard recalled asking the question she still asks today: How do we connect the rural and urban aspects of the state?

One of the challenges between rural and urban, Leonard contended, is that there is more incentive for companies to innovate and provide services for the Metropolis. It's as though the pull toward serving rural communities needs to involve a consideration of social-capital, to be fully viable, as market incentives aren't always there for new investments, such as broadband.

And Leonard also noted that in Minnesota, it may not be so much a rural-urban gap as a regional separation. The efforts at regionalization in the 1980s have taken hold, creating regions for economic development that reflect the local needs and opportunities, but also tend to divide the state, weakening our sense of statehood and our aggregate strength to take on statewide challenges. But technology is changing this, or at least has the capacity to. Especially in education...

6. Achievement gap in education is of deep concern— "We need to boost the use of technology to find efficiencies in K-12, instead of just consolidating districts. This sort of technology build-out does cost money, but it provides flexibility and increased options."

"One of my deepest concerns," Leonard said, "is the achievement gap, both in the central cities *and* other parts of the state." It is more concentrated in the central cities where poverty is also more concentrated, but exists elsewhere also tied to poverty-and with just as significant of consequences."

A member asked Leonard if there was one thing in particular-one aspect of education-where she would concentrate attention most. "Anything aged 0-5," she responded. All the research shows that this is where we can have the biggest impact.

Asked about her preference for privately or publicly run preschools, Leonard reflected, "It never occurred to me that there would be a distinction between pre-school and kindergarten. We need to have greater continuity between pre-school and elementary school. Perhaps that means bringing pre-school into the public system."

7. Thinking on the idea of statehood— "I wanted to use the sesquicentennial," Leonard said in closing, "as an opportunity to think on the idea of statehood-an intellectual consideration of the meaning of statehood as well as engaging people in the spirit of statehood as a catalyst for building a good future- that sense of belonging together and working together as Minnesotans." This is the form that many of the commission's materials took, including pamphlets focusing on history and stories that

illustrate the accomplishments and failures along the statehood journey. "People are interested in learning about their state, from school-age to adult, and for those who engaged in Sesquicentennial commemorations in their own communities, there was also a sense of pride that came from the statewide recognition of their efforts."

8. Thank you —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, the chair thanked Leonard for being with us today.