



Summary of Discussion with Senate Minority Leader David Senjem

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

May 29, 2009

Present: Verne Johnson (chair); David Broden, Marianne Curry, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald, John Mooty, and Wayne Popham (phone)

A. Context of the meeting -In the wake of one of the most challenging and eventful legislative sessions in Minnesota history, the Senate minority leader will share his thoughts on the condition of the state's governance, its leadership, and its economy.

B. Welcome and introductions- Welcome to Senator David Senjem, who has visited with the Caucus once before. Senator Dave Senjem (pronounced SEN-jum) 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.

Senator Senjem graduated from Hayfield High School and received a BA from Luther College. Senjem served 11 years on the Rochester City Council. Senjem recently retired from Mayo Clinic where he served as an institutional biosafety officer and was responsible for all aspects of environmental regulatory compliance. He joined Mayo in 1964.

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

1. Settling the session —The session wasn't run well, Senjem said. Partisanship prevailed over statesmanship. Republicanism was substituted for gestures of direct democracy, and time was not put to good use. After the Governor's budget was released both parties spent weeks running around the state holding listening sessions.

Personalities probably had some role to play. Gov. Pawlenty and Sen. Pogemiller didn't appear to work well together. The House speaker, Margaret Anderson Kelliher, seems to do a better job keeping personality out of the way of things. In the parties, the culture is not there to cross over the isle.

2. Evaluation of nominating-elections process —A member asked the Senator if the climate at the capitol has anything to do with the election process, with caucuses? Senjem said he would have run with or without his party's nomination, but that he is in a privileged position to do that. Most others

need their party's endorsements. The caucus system cannot be changed in law, so he is not sure we will move away from it.

4. Long-term impact on the state—Someone asked who at the legislature is keeping an eye on the long-term spending of the state—the tails of capital projects, the unfunded liabilities of the government. "We've created a dependency that transcends generations," Senjem replied. "Special interests have a right to get their voice heard, but they have too much power over what and how we spend."

5. A professional legislature—Is Senator Senjem part of a dying breed, he was asked, having maintained a career while in the legislature (recently retired)? "It took flexibility and sacrifice," he said, and an understanding but not a giving employer. "I used vacation days," he said, "to make it work."

It's difficult to recruit candidates with outside jobs, he said. "One problem," Senjem said, reflecting on his experience in recruiting candidates for office, "is that the real candidates you want can't do it. They have a career to attend to." There's a drawback to a full time legislature. "There are a lot of people for whom this is their job. They need it. I don't think they have much of a civic life beyond the capitol." He continued: "When people are dependent on it [as their job], they don't want to lose it."

Should we go then to a decidedly part-time body? "The business of the legislature is complicated, he replied, but we could probably get it done in only 3-4 months." As noted earlier weeks were lost this session in listening sessions. Everything comes down to the final two weeks, as it is. It would also not hurt to think about limiting the number of bills, he said.

6. High priority agenda items?—A question: if the Senator were in the majority now, does he have anything ready—any ideas ready-to go? Working on the business climate, he said, as well as relationships at the legislature. They (Republicans) would "be strong on education, transportation, some of these things may not be that different than they are now."

7. Importance of growing jobs—A member asked about the relative emphasis on job creation versus the debate on raising taxes versus cutting spending. This involves more than tax rates. "We have a bad business climate," the Senator said. We are #42 on one non-profit's business climate index.

Thinking back 30 years, the main drivers of the budget were the same: health care has grown, but education, transportation, public pensions are all there. One member, in government at the time, remembered 3M saying that they wouldn't build another new building in the state. We hear that now, too; only more loudly.

It's not all about tax structure. It is attitude and leadership. Former Governor Rudy Perpich's appetite for jobs was insatiable. "Jobs, jobs, jobs," he would say. "We need more economic activity, not taxes. "Don't want to raise taxes? Then go get business!"

Venture capitalists have told the Senator that Minnesota is the toughest state to work in. "We need someone out there peddling this state," Senjem followed. "We lost an entire office building of well-paying IBM jobs to Iowa." How, a member asked? "They out-hustled us. Proposals, creativity, enthusiasm."

This is a function of the executive branch, a member observed. What is being done to create a good business climate besides tax rates? The Senator said there are examples (biotech, below) of success, but that his access to the Governor has been limited. He is not sure

The Chair pushed the Senator to light a candle. Does he have any ideas?

Focus on what's important, Senjem said. We need a job-creating climate, because everything comes from that. Our focus on tax rates is only part of the equation. The Minnesota legislature is too caught up in managing the social and civic affairs of the state. We are missing this fundamental point. We need leadership, energy, and vibrancy for creating a culture of jobs.

8. Reform in state government?— When asked whether he sees a need for structural reform in the state, the Senator said that, "I come from a place called Mayo, where reform and improvement are a constant and are part of the culture." From the way technology is used to the framework in which people go about their business, everything is different than in state government. "We have different phone lines," he said, referring to the capitol and state office buildings, illustrating the point.

9. Agreement with Civic Caucus transportation report —*Have you read the Civic Caucus report? Yes. Do you agree with its recommendations?* "It makes perfect sense." See http://www.civiccaucus.org/ReportTransportation_09.htm for the Civic Caucus report on transportation.

10. Possibility for major innovation in health care —Health care is a section of the state budget that has been growing dramatically. We keep people alive, which is good, but costs a lot. Research is essential. If we continue to innovate, and can identify and stave off diseases, we will be able to save quite a lot of money.

There is a major biotechnology initiative underway, Senjem said, called Elk Run in Pine Island, Minnesota (<http://www.elkrun.info/biotech/>). It is being developed by an entrepreneur out of California, through Tower Investments.

Tower bought 1,200 acres-no small feat-just north of Rochester, and plans to partner with Mayo and the University of Minnesota to bridge the academic with commercial in medical technology. This is good, Senjem said. "When you go to Harvard," and look at their medical and research operations, "you are struck by the commercial component."

This development will position Minnesota as an international leader in biotechnology, the Senator said. It is also an example of what can happen when government and business leaders work together to attract enterprise.

11. Opposition to a legislative commission on redistricting —Senjem noted that the Senate passed a bill for a special commission of five ex-judges to draw legislative district boundaries. He opposed that plan. He believes the current system works best, under which the courts can decide if someone challenges a legislatively-approved redistricting plan.

12. Closing thoughts— Any closing thoughts? The Senator says that he has been very disappointed with this past session, on both sides. Politics overrode good governance. "To leave with this budget," he said; "the final ten minutes of the session was an embarrassment to this Legislature, to the institution of government, and to those that came before. I am still profoundly bothered by it."

On the economy, Senjem said that we should expect unemployment to continue to balloon-perhaps doubling-before it starts to go back down. "Jobs, jobs, jobs," came the refrain.

Thank you, from the Chair, to the Senator for the conversation today.